A Tom Quest Adventure

SIGN OF THE SPIRAL

By FRAN STRIKER

Author of "THE LONE RANGER" Books

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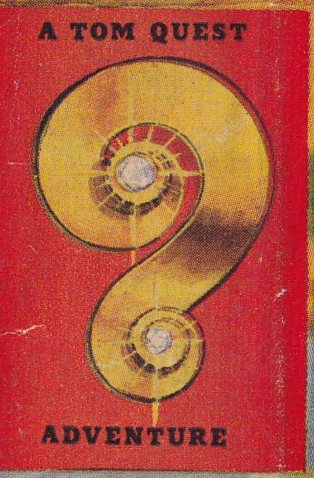

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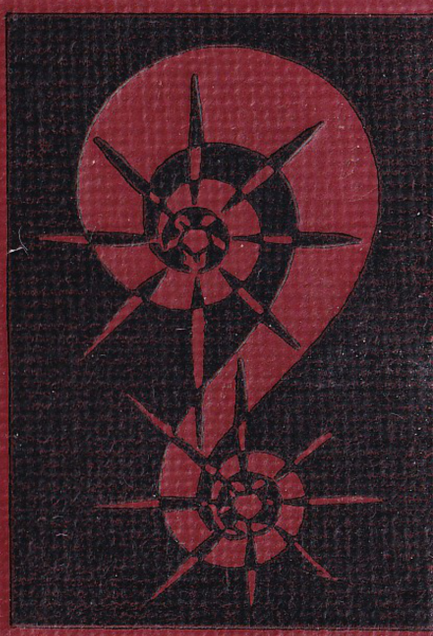

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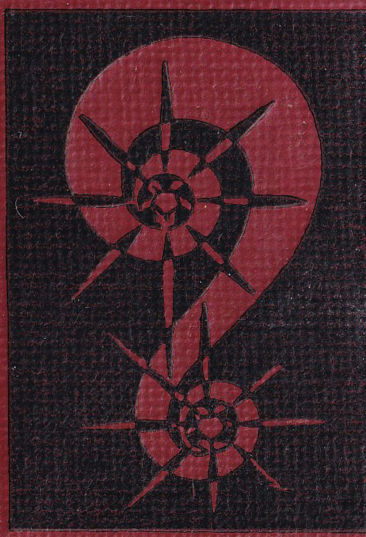

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A Tom Quest Adventure Story

SIGN OF THE SPIRAL

By FRAN STRIKER

A GHOST TOWN in Texas, a strange rumbling in the earth, a cry in the night—and a thrilling new adventure series is off to an exciting start! Fran Striker, popular author of many boys' books, now introduces young Tom Quest. Tom is the son of the famous scientist-explorer Hamilton Quest, wl ose disappearance on an ill-fated expedition into unexplored Peru has been a mystery of ten year's standing.

A single clue found in a newspaper photograph encourages Tom and his loyal friend Gulliver, a burly Texan, to hope that Tom's father may still be alive. When Whiz Walton, ace news correspondent joins them, the three friends follow the strange trail of the spiral that leads them straight to the heart of danger.

What Tom finds at the end of the trail and how the indomitable Gulliver and the keen-witted newshawk help him to handle the startling complications that develop makes a story that will thrill every lover of fast-paced adventure.

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KUHLHOFF

The significance of that pattern struck Tom like a thunderbolt!

Sign of the Spiral

A Tom Quest Adventure

SIGN OF THE SPIRAL

By

FRAN STRIKER

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SIGN OF THE SPIRAL

CHAPTER 1

Texas Bound

A SMALL TRAIN chugged along the single track, its headlight piercing the darkness with a tunnel of light. The train ran southwest from Lubbock County toward that part of Texas that folds in a right angle around a corner of New Mexico. It ran, with little regard for schedule, to serve the widely spaced towns that studded the route.

There were several cars in the train, but only one held passengers. In this ancient coach a dozen people sprawled awkwardly as they slept or tried to sleep on the uncompromising, red plush seats.

At one end of the car a man whose thin hair was receding from his temples slept with his feet propped on the opposite seat. His head rolled from one side to the other as the car rocked on the rails, but this didn't seem to disturb "Whiz" Walton's slumbers.

Back home in New York, Walton was a well-known

individual. Fifteen years as a roving reporter and columnist had won him a wide and varied list of friends. He was on cordial terms with waiters and wastrels, socialities and show people, baseball players and brokers, murderers and magnates, hoodlums and headliners, gangsters and gag-writers. He'd seen people in all walks of life shaken by emotional outbursts. He'd seen so much of life that his own emotions were dulled and he had become cynical and tolerant.

Whiz Walton's existence had been an endless round of irregular hours and a diet consisting mainly of rich night-club food, indigestion tablets, headache remedies and cigarettes. His nerves were ragged from the constant pressure of a deadline, and from sleeping with one ear cocked to catch the jangling of a telephone that might start him on an exclusive story.

He'd won his nickname the hard way, and he showed it. His face, even in sleep, was tense. His complexion was sallow, his cheeks sunken, and there were large puffs of flesh beneath his eyes. He looked much older than thirty-five.

Whiz had declared a holiday and had set out on a vacation that would last at least a year. He was on his way to a ranch in New Mexico where he intended to feast his tired eyes on real sunshine and fill his lungs with clean air. He was going to eat solid food and catch up on sleep. He intended to regain something of the health and physique of his college days when he had played left half on the varsity.

At this very moment he was dreaming of the Rose

Bowl game when he'd carried the ball for a touchdown. As he slumbered peacefully, he was quite unaware of storm clouds that were gathering at the opposite end of the car where sat a gentleman whose mental and physical powers were the exact opposite of his own. The gentleman in question may have been a descendant of Laocoön of ancient Greece, whose physique he certainly inherited, but not his I. Q. In short, he was a Greek hailing from the city at the other end of the Brooklyn Bridge, and bore the illustrious name of Demetrius.

Demetrius had moved to a seat beneath one of the few lighted bulbs so that he might be able to read his newspaper. For some time he had been following the Greek words with a stubby forefinger while his thick lips formed the syllables. Presently he fumbled for cigarettes. As his heavy hands explored the pockets of his gaudy jacket, increasing perplexity made furrows between his thick eyebrows. Then he investigated the breast pockets of an open-throated, pink sport shirt. His cigarettes in their solid-gold case were missing.

Demetrius tossed his newspaper aside and began a more methodical search. He went through every pocket in turn. He found his wallet, his change, his keys, a clipper for his fingernails, a grease-clogged comb, a cigarette lighter and an assortment of minor items, but he found no cigarette case.

An angry rumble that began somewhere in the vastness of his hairy chest surged past his tonsils and gushed like rocket power between his perfect white teeth. "I been robbed!" he yelled.

With a muscle-bound lack of grace, Demetrius swung out of his seat and lumbered, bearlike, up the aisle, grim purpose on his blue-jowled face and sizzling anger in his tar-black eyes.

Of all this, Whiz Walton was blissfully unaware. He, in his dreams, relived the past. He was the idol of the stadium, the hero of the gridiron, the beneficiary of wild cheers from fifty thousand hysterical collegians for he had just scored a touchdown to make the score 6–0. The stands rocked with the applause and then, it seemed, the stands collapsed upon him.

He felt a crushing pressure on his chest followed by a jerk that nearly snapped his neck from his torso. He felt himself lifted through space where there was neither time nor substance, then landed with spine-jarring force.

His brain whirled and he blinked his eyes in an effort to drive away the fog of sleep. Gradually he became aware of the musty atmosphere of the coach and, at closer range, the cloying aroma of an after-shaving concoction that seemed to be a stifling concentrate of lilies of the valley. He saw black hair, sleeked until it gleamed like a wet seal.

He realized that he was out of his seat, supported in a more or less perpendicular position in the aisle. A firm clutch on his coat lapels kept him from falling. He recognized the man who stood before him. It was Demetrius, the wrestler, with whom Whiz had shared his seat earlier in the trip. The newspaperman realized that Demetrius was angry and the realization gave him a sinking feeling.

"You thief! You robbed Demetrius," the wrestler shouted.

For the moment Whiz was flabbergasted. He cleared his throat and stammered, "N-now hold on. W-wait a minute. I—I don't know what you're talking about."

"My cigarette case with the diamonds," the irate Greek accused. "The one I get for being wrassling champ. You stole it."

Whiz, at last, was wide awake, and had a clear-cut grasp of the situation. "You think I swiped a cigarette case from you?" he demanded. "You must be nuts. Let me go."

Demetrius tightened his grip on the reporter's coat. With his free hand he slapped at Whiz's pockets. "You give back cigarette case," he threatened, "or Demetrius break you into little pieces."

There was a stir in the car as waking passengers sat up to watch the incident. Whiz was angry and embarrassed. "You're not going to break anyone into little pieces," he retorted. "I don't know anything about that hunk of tin and glass. Now will you let go of my coat, you cretin."

After it was over, Whiz couldn't tell why he did it. It was like begging for instant annihilation, but he couldn't help it. His pride rather than his judgment directed his action. He drew back his fist and shot a clean, sharp blow that went "splat" against the wrestler's heavy chin.

It was like hitting the armor plate of a battlewagon. Whiz felt the shock all the way to his shoulder.

A look of incredulity came into the face of Demetrius. The outrageous audacity of the underweight reporter shocked him far more than the force of the blow. He grinned in a way that Whiz would remember in nightmares. "So now," he said, "we get to play rough!"

CHAPTER 2

Tom Takes a Hand

TOM QUEST woke in a flash without any sudden movement or alteration in his rate of breathing. One moment he had been in deep sleep as the train clattered through the Texas night. Now, wide awake, he sat upright and turned in his seat to see what had roused him.

Ten years ago, as a boy of seven, Tom Quest had been with his parents in the jungles of Peru. It was there that he had acquired an almost animallike ability to waken instantly with every faculty keen as a razor's edge. In that jungle country, as in no other part of the world, eternal vigilance was the price of safety. Tom had learned his lessons young and they'd stayed with him through ten years of schooling in the East, years broken only by infrequent visits to the friend who was to meet the train at Bliss.

While in the jungle at his father's camp, Tom Quest

had learned also the fundamental secret of friendship. He had learned to meet peons, Indian laborers, and even jungle savages with an honest desire to be friendly.

In the years that followed, Tom's sincerity made him exceedingly popular with his schoolmates. He would have been popular even without the athletic ability that boosted him to the captaincy of three of his school teams.

Athletic competition had given Tom a strong sense of fair play. So, now, as he realized what was going on in the dimly lighted aisle at his side, he resented the inequality of the struggle. His gray eyes danced when he saw Whiz Walton hit Demetrius, but sobered quickly as he foresaw the inevitable consequences that must follow.

Demetrius, wearing the grin that always terrorized opponents in the wrestling arena, drew back his right hand while his left still held Whiz Walton in a viselike grip. The brawny arm started forward in a wide swing to land an openhanded slap on Walton's face.

Tom Quest acted impulsively. Leaping from the seat, he used a trick learned from his Math instructor who had been a Commando. Holding his hand open with the fingers rigidly extended, he chopped at the inner side of the wrestler's wrist. Demetrius had put a lot into his swing. The force behind his own blow added to Tom's to increase the impact. The edge of Tom's hand landed with surgical accuracy on nerves and muscles that, even in a wrestler, were not designed to stand such treatment.

Demetrius' whole arm went limp. He bellowed in surprise and his face twisted in pain. He released his grip on Whiz Walton to clutch his throbbing wrist.

Whiz had been off balance. Suddenly released, he fell to the floor and stayed there momentarily to survey the situation. For the first time he saw the dark-haired newcomer who had intervened in his behalf. He was surprised to discover that he had been helped by a boy in his teens.

Tom was poised, every muscle tense, to meet the next move of the wrestler. His level eyes watched Demetrius massage the lamed wrist to the accompaniment of moans and groans.

In height, Tom and Demetrius were equals. Each stood about one inch below six feet, but there the similarity ended. Tom's broad shoulders tapered to a slim waist and hips. The wrestler had a torso that might have been molded in a barrel. Demetrius' strength was comparable to a slab of reinforced concrete whereas Tom reminded the reporter of an expression he had once used to describe a greyhound—"lean, whipcorded strength."

Whiz knew that Demetrius at any instant might explode into a frenzy of action born of pain and unreasoning fury. He might go after Tom with his fists, or he might resort to wrestling tactics to crush his opponent. In either case the result would be devastating.

Whiz Walton had founded a career upon his ability to recognize and grasp a fleeting opportunity. Inspired by a close view of the wrestler's blue suede shoes of incredible size, he scrambled to his feet, then stamped hard on Demetrius' toe. Demetrius forgot his wrist. Hopping on one foot, he clutched the other in both hands while scrambled profanity from Greece and Brooklyn filled the air.

The dimmed lights in the car flashed into full bril-

liance and the conductor came down the aisle demanding explanations.

Whiz pointed to Demetrius sitting on the armrest of a vacant seat. The wrestler pulled off his shoes and hugged his outraged toes which were encased in anklets of canary yellow. When his wails subsided he looked at the conductor. His eyes were moist with tears of anger and futility.

"I, Demetrius," he complained, "I'm sat up front where it's light to read. I'm reading about Archimedes. I'm quiet. I'm hurting no one, minding my own business. I'm wanting a cigarette and then I find it's gone."

"What's gone?" demanded the conductor.

"The prize! It proves I'm wrassling champeen of the world for my weight in Dalware."

The conductor squinted in perplexity. He swallowed hard, then said, "I don't savvy. Come again."

"He's a professional wrestler," explained Whiz Walton. "He's a champion of the world."

"In Dalware," added Demetrius proudly.

"You see," the reporter went on, "in most sports there's a world champion."

"I know that," the conductor said.

"Well, in wrestling there's a world champion in every locality. This oaf is champ in Delaware."

"What's that got to do with the goin's on in my car?"

Demetrius opened his mouth and took a deep breath, but before he could speak, Whiz Walton tapped him on the shoulder. "I'll explain it," he said.

Demetrius nodded gratefully.

"When he got on the train at Lubbock he parked next to me," said Whiz. "He had a fancy cigarette case he'd won as a prize."

"For being champeen of the world in Dalware," put in the wrestler, as if determined to register this point.

"I got sleepy and wanted to stretch out so I told him to find another seat. Next thing I know, I'm dangling from one of his mitts and he's accusing me of swiping his case."

The conductor nodded comprehendingly. He reached into a pocket of his blue coat and pulled out a flat metal case. "Is this what all the hullabaloo's about?" he demanded.

"It's mine," cried Demetrius, reaching with both hands. "It's my prize with di'monds from Dalware!"

"I picked it up in the washroom," the conductor explained. "I was aimin' to ask the customers about it as they got off the train."

Demetrius was voluble in his apologies. He told of going into the washroom to shave and comb his hair. "I'm thinking of Archimedes," he explained. "I'm through with shave and I'm thinking some more of Archimedes. I'm back reading about Archimedes and forget the prize."

"Archimedes darned near got me a broken neck," muttered Whiz Walton dryly. He turned to Tom Quest and said, "That slap probably would have connected with my head. You did some quick thinking. Thanks for blocking."

Tom grinned. "I was lucky to get him in the right place," he said.

"What's your name?"

"Tom Quest."

"I'm Walton—Whiz Walton."

Tom's eyes widened. "Are you the newspaper columnist?"

"I *was* until a few days ago. I'm not now. I've declared a leave of absence for myself."

Tom Quest gripped the reporter's hand exclaiming, "Gosh, I'm sure glad to meet you!"

The wrestler broke in beaming. "Me," he said, sticking out his paw, "I'm Demetrius."

"World champeen in Dalware," added Whiz in imitation of the grappler. "Shake hands with Tom Quest."

Tom's hand was lost in the wrestler's massive grip. "I hope your wrist is all right," he said.

Demetrius nodded and his dark eyes sparkled with admiration. He held Tom's hand gently in both of his own huge paws.

"Let me tell you," he said. "I'm wrassle the Black Phantom, I'm wrassle the Hooded Horror, I'm wrassle Man Mountain an I'm wrassle the Atom Bomb. I'm wrassle them all an' I'm too tough! Not one of them hurts Demetrius. But you, ha, you make Demetrius pain in arm like everything. I love you!"

Whiz chuckled and said, "You'd better buy that, Tom. It's the sincerest compliment you'll ever get."

A few minutes later the wrestler limped back to his seat carrying his shoe. The conductor dimmed the lights and disappeared. Whiz Walton motioned Tom to the seat beside him and said, "Sit on my side of the aisle, Tom. Let's talk."

CHAPTER 3

Whiz Walton

DEMETRIUS had been involved in a number of ludicrous affairs both in and out of the wrestling ring and Whiz Walton had heard about most of them. He entertained Tom Quest with a low-voiced account of the wrestler's career while the darkened train approached the town of Bliss.

Tom's amusement was genuine, but there was something in his face that told Whiz Walton his attention was divided. The veteran newshawk finally said, "What is it, Tom?"

"What's what?"

"Something's on your mind."

"Well—yes, there is," admitted Tom. "All those stories you've been telling about Demetrius—"

"What about them?"

Tom turned to face Whiz Walton squarely. "Whiz," he said, "do you ever try to make believe you're someone else?"

"Not me," replied the columnist emphatically. "I know too much about other people. Why?"

Tom settled back in his seat. "Skip it," he said. "I don't think you'd understand."

"Give it a whirl and let me try."

"It's just one of Dad's ideas. Dad had a lot of theories, but people wouldn't listen to them. They thought he was—well, they thought he was eccentric."

"People give me a pain in the neck," Whiz observed.

"Dad was brilliant," Tom said stoutly. "That was the trouble. He was too brilliant. People didn't understand him. They laughed at him."

"That puts your dad in pretty famous company, Tom. People laughed at Edison. They laughed at the Wright brothers when they said they could fly. They laughed at Fulton—called his steamboat 'Fulton's Folly.' What did your father do?"

"He was a scientist. He taught mathematics until he had a row with the university. He wanted to pass on some of his theories of logic to his pupils, but the Dean said his stuff was too advanced. There was a pretty hot argument and Dad walked out."

A faraway expression came into Whiz Walton's face. Some subconscious recollection seemed to be tapping for attention.

Tom went on. "Dad had a theory that if you knew a

person real well you could figure out what he'd do by making believe *you* were that person. The more you know about him, the easier it is to put yourself in his place."

"It's an interesting idea," observed the reporter.

"And it works! When I play football I put myself in the position of the quarterback on the other team. I make believe I'm just his type, with the same amount of ability and the same temperament. I've guessed a lot of plays that way."

"That's not guesswork," Whiz said. "That's applied logic."

"Maybe that's it."

"But how did we get into this?"

"You asked me what I had on my mind while you were talking about Demetrius. The more you talked about him, the dumber he sounded."

"Well, you could hardly call him a mental giant."

"That's just it," said Tom. "Yet he spoke of Archimedes. In fact, he was so interested in Archimedes that he forgot where he had left his cigarette case."

A twinkle came into Whiz Walton's eyes as Tom Quest went on seriously.

"Archimedes was one of the greatest scientists who ever lived. Dad thought he was *the* greatest. He had a lot of books about him, some of them written in Greek. He traced almost every one of the math problems Archimedes had solved. He worked every one of the twenty-eight propositions on spirals."

"Just a minute," interrupted Whiz. "Were you trying to imagine yourself as Demetrius?"

"Yes! And I can't imagine Demetrius understanding Archimedes."

Whiz smiled. "Demetrius wasn't talking about the Greek mathematician," he explained. "He was reading a Greek newspaper account of a *wrestler* named Archimedes. One of the world champs."

"So that's it," laughed Tom.

Whiz Walton became serious. "Tell me some more about your father," he said.

"I wish I'd known him better," Tom murmured wistfully. "He disappeared when I was just a kid of seven."

"Disappeared?"

"When he left the university he spent some time writing books. Then he joined an expedition to Peru and took Mother and me along with him."

Whiz Walton slapped his knee. "That's it!" he exclaimed. "Now I've got it."

Tom looked at the reporter in surprise.

"Quest!" Whiz said. "I knew I'd heard the name somewhere. I've been trying to remember. Your father's name was Hamilton Quest."

"That's right."

"I was on the *Tribune* when that expedition started for Peru. I interviewed your father. I remember him, Tom, and he was a swell guy. I'll never forget what he said to me when I asked him for a statement."

"What did he say?" asked Tom eagerly.

Whiz Walton chuckled at the recollection. "I was just a cub reporter at the time. Your father put a hand on my shoulder. He said he wouldn't give me a statement for

the press, but he'd give me a tip that might help my career."

"What did he tell you?"

"He said, 'Walton, if ever you want to know where the dog buried the bone, just make believe you're a dog with a bone to bury. Go where the dog would go, and you'll find that the dog had the same idea.' "

"Dad left that in one of his notebooks."

"What happened in Peru?" asked Walton. "I lost track of the expedition."

"Well," Tom began, "the expedition went into the disputed territory between Peru and Ecuador to make friends with the Indians and try to learn how curare was made."

"That's the poisonous stuff the savages use for their blowgun darts, isn't it?"

Tom nodded.

"What happened?"

"We had a permanent camp on the bank of a river, a branch of the Ucayali. The men worked out of that camp. When my mother died of tropic fever, Dad decided to send me back to the States. He was doing some important work and couldn't get away, so he sent a friend named Gulliver back with me. Gulliver put me in boarding school. A few months went by, and then we had word that savages had attacked the camp and—well—that was the last we heard. Just one man escaped to bring the news."

"You stayed in school?"

"Yes. Gulliver insisted on it."

"He pay your way?"

"He hasn't had to. Dad's book royalties take care of things."

"Where is Gulliver?"

"He couldn't stand New York. He'd originally lived in Texas so he went back to his little ranch. I visit him during vacations. He's to meet me at Bliss."

Something tingled up and down Whiz Walton's spine. It was a curious, unexplainable sensation that came to him from time to time as a forerunner of important events. It was like a green light telling him to proceed. He probed further.

"Have you finished school?" he asked.

Tom said, "No. I'm supposed to graduate this year."

"Supposed to?"

Tom nodded.

"Is there any doubt about it?"

"Well, I—uh—I don't know."

"This isn't vacation time," Walton observed. "How come you're taking a trip?"

"Gulliver wrote and asked me to come to Texas."

"Even though you had to cut school?"

"Yes."

There was a pause during which the reporter eyed Tom Quest thoughtfully. "Gulliver must have something important on his chest," he observed, "to take you away from school." He lowered his feet which had been resting on the opposing seat and sat up straight. "There's something big in the air and I'll bet all the tea in China that it has something to do with your father!"

Tom looked startled. "What," he demanded, "gave you that idea?"

Whiz grinned broadly. "I tried your kind of logic," he explained. "I put myself in your position—made believe that I was you. I asked myself what would be important enough to drag me away from school when it might cost me my diploma. Money wouldn't do it. You don't look like you're in love, so it can't be a girl. What does that leave? Your father."

Tom nodded slowly. "Dad knew what he was talking about when he told you how to find where the dog buried the bone," he murmured.

"There's word of your father?"

"Not exactly."

"Then what's the low-down?"

Tom liked Whiz Walton's straightforward manner. For some time he had been debating whether or not to confide in his traveling companion. Now he decided in the affirmative. He reached for his brief case which was on the seat across the aisle. Opening it, he drew out a brown Manila envelope. "I have a couple of photographs here," he said, "but before I show them to you, I want you to look at my ring."

CHAPTER 4

The Spiral of Archimedes

TOM QUEST slipped a heavy, gold ring from his finger and handed it to the reporter. A small diamond was mounted in the center of a flat surface. The diamond was surrounded by a spiral of gold ribbon. At the bottom of the spiral, the outside end of the ribbon curved in the opposite direction to encircle a second gem. The pattern as a whole looked somewhat like an overstuffed interrogation mark.

"Pretty neat," commented Whiz Walton. "Looks something like a question mark. I've never seen anything like it."

"My father designed it," explained Tom. "He had a jeweler make a pair of earrings and a brooch for Mother. When Mother died, Dad gave one of her earrings to me and the other to his best friend."

"Gulliver?"

"Yes. A couple of years ago Gulliver and I had the earrings mounted on rings."

Whiz examined the ring more carefully. " 'Quest' is a lot like 'question,' " he murmured. "I suppose your dad took the pattern from his name."

"Dad wasn't thinking of a question mark when he made the design."

"No?"

Tom shook his head. "He was thinking of Archimedes, his favorite character in history."

"Archimedes again!"

"You know how he died, don't you?"

Whiz Walton thought for a moment, drawing on the deep well of his memory. "It seems to me," he said slowly, "he was stabbed in the back."

"That's right. It was in 212 B.C. He was stabbed by a Roman soldier as he bent over to draw a mathematical figure in the sand. He was working on a theory for measuring the area of the spiral." Tom pointed to the ring. "That," he said, "is the pattern he drew."

Whiz studied the ring a moment longer, then returned it to Tom Quest.

"You had to know about the earrings and the brooch to understand why these pictures are so important." As he spoke, Tom opened the flap of the Manila envelope. "I told you that the design was unique. There's probably no other brooch in the world like the one Dad designed."

"I'll take your word for that, Tom. What are the photos?"

Tom handed an eight-by-ten glossy print to the reporter. "Gulliver sent these pictures to me," he explained.

The first picture had been taken in jungle country. A white man in tattered clothing posed in front of dense tropical foliage. He was flanked by half-naked Indians. Tom pointed to one Indian who was wearing some sort of decoration on a string around his neck.

"See this decoration?"

"I see it, but I can't make out what it is."

The second photograph was an enlargement of a small portion of the first. The ornament was much larger against the dark background of the Indian's bare chest.

The print was sharp and clear, showing every pore of the skin. The string about the Indian's neck came from the upper edge of the photo to form a "V." The ornament dangling from the string stood out in bold relief. Sun, reflecting from the curves of pure gold, made gleaming highlights. Every facet of the diamonds was clearly shown. Whiz Walton recognized the pattern. It was the spiral of Archimedes.

"That," said Tom softly, "is my mother's brooch."

Whiz Walton gave a low, exclamatory whistle.

"I have another picture," Tom went on. "This is an enlargement of the white man."

The man in the picture was tall and so thin he looked gaunt. His eyes were deep-set beneath a broad, intellectual forehead. His cheeks were sunken and his face had a tense, drawn expression. He looked like one who had been through a long siege of illness or starvation.

"This isn't your father, *is* it?"

"No. That's John Hanford. He was an engineer. He used to build tunnels and bridges."

"I remember the name," said Whiz Walton. "John Hanford did a tunnel beneath the East River."

"He was on the expedition with my father," Tom explained. "He and Dad were close friends. They worked together most of the time. Hanford was given up for dead, just like Dad."

"What about it, Tom?"

Tom pointed to the original photograph. "That picture," he said slowly, "was taken less than a year ago."

"So Hanford was alive at that time!" exclaimed the reporter.

"Yes. Not only that, Whiz, he was with Indians who had the spiral brooch! Hanford must know something about my father. Maybe Dad is still alive!"

"Who took the picture?"

"A flier from Texas. He was over the jungle when his plane conked and he had to bail out. There was a camera in his emergency kit, so he shot pictures of the people who found him. He made his way to civilization and took the film along. He was killed in another crackup. That picture was in the stuff sent home to his parents.

"The home-town paper published the picture. Gulliver saw it and recognized John Hanford in spite of the way he's changed in the past ten years. When Gulliver examined the picture more closely, he recognized the brooch. Then he got busy. When he found out that Hanford had come out of the jungle with the flier, he began trying to locate Hanford."

"Did Gulliver find him?" asked Whiz Walton.

"Not yet," replied Tom. "Gulliver's on his trail, I think. He must be or he wouldn't have asked me to come down."

"Holy mackerel!" exclaimed the reporter. "Where is he?"

"In Texas. I'm not sure just where, but Gulliver will know."

Whiz lapsed into silence for several minutes while he considered what Tom had said. When he spoke, it was in a low grumble, as if he were thinking aloud. "For five years I've been working up to a vacation. When I left New York, I swore I wasn't going to do a darned thing but rest, eat and sleep. I told myself I wouldn't touch a story with a ten-foot pole! Then *this* is tossed in my lap. If Hamilton Quest *is* alive, it'll be *news*. Big news. Maybe the biggest story of the decade!" He sighed heavily and murmured, "Oh, well—" in a tone of resignation. He turned to Tom. "You said you were to meet Gulliver in Bliss?"

Tom nodded. "It's the next stop."

"By a curious coincidence," said Whiz slowly, "that's just where I'm getting off."

"I thought so."

"What made you think so?"

Tom grinned. "Well, I knew from the way you talked to yourself that you were debating. While you were doing that, I made believe I was a reporter like you—"

"Skip the rest," interrupted Whiz. "If you were in my place, you'd decide to get off the train and find out what

Gulliver has to say. Well, that's what I'm going to do. If I don't, my curiosity won't let me sleep."

The lights in the car flashed bright and the train slowed.

The conductor called out, "Bliss."

CHAPTER 5

"So This Is Texas!"

THE TAILLIGHTS of the train looked like red fireflies in the distance. An instant later they were mere pin points, then they disappeared completely in the total darkness that comes just before dawn. The wooden platform of the station at Bliss was illuminated by a single bulb that burned dimly in a halo of cobwebs beneath a fluted reflector overhead. Scores of flying creatures playing tag around the light were the only signs of life or movement.

Whiz Walton went to each end of the platform and looked into the empty darkness. He returned to Tom Quest, standing by the suitcases. As he eyed the dark windows of the deserted station, he took a well-chewed wooden match from between his thin lips and replaced it with a cigarette.

"So this," he muttered disgustedly, "is Texas." He rasped the match with his thumbnail. In the stillness the slight snap, as it broke into flame, sounded like a pistol

shot. "I thought your friend was going to meet you here!"

"That's what I thought," replied Tom, with a puzzled frown. "I wonder if anything's happened to Gulliver." As he stepped nearer the station building to try the door, he saw a sheet of paper hanging from a nail on the door. It looked like a note. Tom moved closer. "Strike a light, will you, Whiz?" he asked.

"Uh-huh."

The reporter rubbed a match on the door and held it close to the note. "Addressed to you," he said.

The note was written in pencil on a sheet of ruled paper. The grubby, backhand letters were crowded together and the note was hard to read. Tom Quest's name was centered at the top of the page. The message followed in three parts.

"Gulliver has got into some trouble & telephoned to say so & also to say he mite be late gettin here. Make yrself to home. The door aint locked so go on inside in case yr tired & stretch out on the bench where you can sleep till he—meanin Gulliver gets here.

Sign.
Zeb Oliphant
Station Master.

PS. Mary sent me back with a blanket in case its cold which I left on bench.

Sign.
Zeb Oliphant
Station Master.

PS (again) Welcome Tom!

Same.

The match flickered out with a stream of smoke and Whiz tossed it away. Tom grinned. "Old Zeb's quite a character," he said. "He lives right across the tracks."

Whiz nodded soberly. "How well do you know him?"

"I've only seen him three times."

"Who's Mary?"

"She's his wife. I've never met her."

The reporter's cigarette glowed brightly as Whiz took a long pull. He let the smoke out slowly before he spoke again. "I suppose," he said, "Zeb and your friend Gulliver are pretty good pals."

Tom shook his head. "I doubt it," he replied. "Gulliver's ranch is fifty miles away. He never comes here unless he's meeting me. I don't think he sees Zeb more than once or twice a year."

There was a curious expression on the reporter's face. He opened the door and entered the station with Tom Quest at his heels.

Light slanting through the window fell in an oblong patch across a long bench near the wall. Whiz crossed the room and fingered a patchwork quilt that lay, neatly folded, on one end of the bench. Then he ran his hand gently over the geometric figures of assorted fabrics that time and many washings had made soft as swan's down. His high forehead was wrinkled in perplexity.

Tom spoke suddenly. "Here," he said, "is something we can use!" He leaped toward a low shelf where a pitcher rested beside an inverted cup. He pulled away a napkin that had covered the top of the pitcher. "Milk!" he exclaimed. "This'll go fine! I'm half starved!"

"Hold on," said Whiz as Tom Quest filled the cup. "How do you know that's milk?"

"What else would it be?" demanded Tom.

"How do you know it's fit to drink?"

Tom looked up in surprise. "It's here, isn't it?" he said simply. "Zeb wouldn't have left it for me if it wasn't good."

"You just take it for granted he left it here for you?"

Tom laughed and passed the brimming cup. "Drink up," he said, "and make it fast so I can use the cup."

With certain misgivings the reporter sipped experimentally. He didn't care much for milk. He rarely drank it. But this tasted unlike anything he'd known in New York. It didn't need enrichment with ice cream and chocolate syrup to make it palatable. It was thick and rich. It was good! He drained the cup and returned it to Tom. But while Tom drank, the cynical reporter felt suspicion and mistrust stirring in his mind.

Why had Zeb left the door unlocked? Why had he left the blanket and the pitcher full of milk? Where Whiz came from people didn't do those things. They had locks on their doors and they used 'em. Anyone who left a door unlocked was just plain nuts. People didn't leave things—handmade blankets, for instance—lying around loose. Why anyone could pick up that blanket and walk off with it. What was it the note said about the blanket? Mary's suggestion . . . in case it was cold. Humph! Something phony about that. Zeb hardly knew Tom Quest—saw him just three times in as many years. Mary didn't know him at all. People don't consider the com-

fort of a casual acquaintance—don't even worry about close friends—unless there's something in it for them. The milk! Why hadn't Zeb mentioned it in the note? Did he think it was too trivial? He'd added a postscript to say "Welcome Tom," but he hadn't mentioned the pitcher of milk. Did apparent kindness hide some sinister scheme? Tom didn't seem to think so.

Tom seemed to take everything for granted. The milk might have been sour or contaminated. It might even have been poisoned! Why had Tom been so serenely confident that it was all right? He hadn't even looked at the cup to make sure it was clean.

"Want some more?"

Whiz looked up quickly. "Huh?"

"More milk?"

"Oh, no—no, thanks."

Tom noticed his friend's preoccupied manner. "Is anything wrong?" he asked.

"I was just thinking something over."

"Oh." Tom poured himself another cup of milk.

Whiz Walton took a last drag on his cigarette. He was about to drop it to the floor, but he changed his mind. Crossing to the door, he flipped the butt across the platform and watched it fall between the rails.

He looked to the east. The horizon was faintly outlined against the first pale streaks of dawn. A slight breeze, delicately scented after sweeping countless miles of fragrant grasses, brushed his face. He took a deep breath. The clean air touched the very bottom of his lungs. It was heady and exhilarating. It seemed to dust

the red imps of suspicion from his brain. His thoughts became aligned in a new pattern. And then he understood.

He understood a lot of things. He understood the unlocked door, the blanket and the pitcher of sweet milk. He understood Zeb Oliphant and Mary. He understood Tom Quest. He realized that he was away from scheming to be paid for everything you do and bargaining for everything you get. He was away from the civilization that demands a cash tip for every favor.

Tom Quest hadn't expected pay for his help when Demetrius looked dangerous. He hadn't intervened to share the danger in the hope of a reward. He'd done it simply because he thought it was the thing to do. According to Tom's code, Whiz had every right to expect such aid. By the same token, Tom accepted the things that Zeb offered. He wouldn't leave money to pay for the milk. You can't pay for genuine kindness with hard cash. Tom would pay, and Zeb would be paid, but not with money. Tom would pass the favor on to someone else. Then it would be passed on again, and then again. Someday Zeb would need a friend. A total stranger, indebted to someone unknown to Zeb, would appear as the friend in need. The stranger's debt would be paid by helping Zeb and then the cycle would be completed. Zeb would be paid for the pitcher of milk.

"So this," murmured Whiz Walton, "is Texas!"

CHAPTER 6

Gulliver

THE NOISE, or more strictly speaking, the combination of noises began somewhere in the darkness toward the south. There was a clanking and a banging that seemed to come from heavy hunks of hardware jouncing on armor plate, also the steady roar of an unmuffled motor and the grinding of a machine in low gear. Twin beams of light shot forward from the four-wheel cacophony.

"I'll bet it's Gulliver!" exclaimed Tom Quest, coming from inside to join Whiz on the station platform. "His letter said he'd bought a jeep."

The source of the din drew nearer, its headlights bouncing crazily. Dawn had progressed far enough to reveal a dirt road running parallel to the railroad tracks, but the oncoming vehicle was nowhere near that road. It was breaking its own trail through a field of knee-high wheat.

Whiz pointed toward the headlights and shouted to make himself heard above the iron-shod tumult. "What's he doing over there?"

Before Tom could reply, the lights fell directly on the station platform. They were there for just an instant but it was enough to identify Tom Quest to the driver of the jeep. Then the bedlam was augmented by gunfire.

Whiz recognized the heavy bark. He'd heard guns of that caliber in gang warfare. "A forty-five!" he exclaimed, grabbing Tom's arm. "That's no toy! Get down! Flat on your face!"

"It's all right, Whiz," began Tom. "I know—" the rest was drowned by two more shots fired into the air, followed by an even more horrifying noise.

The gunfire was bad enough, but this new sound had the nerve-jangling quality of a steel file operating on the jagged edge of a sheet of tin. It was several seconds before Whiz realized that this unearthly cry came from a human throat. It was even harder to believe that it was merely Gulliver's shout of welcome.

"Yahoo-o-o!" he yelled, sustaining the last syllable in a sirenlike falsetto. "Hi there, Tom!"

The bumper of the jeep smacked the edge of the platform and the motor stopped with a final cough and clank. Tom shouted, "Gulliver! It's good to see you."

Gulliver squirmed past the steering wheel and stepped through the space that had once been occupied by a windshield. He placed a huge foot on the heavy grill that protected the radiator and stepped from there to the platform. He was surprisingly agile for a man of such gargan-

tuan proportions. He gripped Tom's shoulders between hands that would make Demetrius' huge paws look ladylike, and spoke in a rasping drawl.

"Tom," he said, "yo' look as good as a painted wagon! I'm downright sorry I was late, but I had more trouble than a bobtailed horse in fly time!"

Whiz Walton couldn't help staring at Gulliver. There was so much of this man. The open collar of his woolen shirt was on a level with the top of Tom's head—and Tom was nearly six feet tall. A belt, at least three inches wide, held up Gulliver's blue dungarees. The gun that hung from a cartridge belt looked small, but that was merely by comparison. In reality it was one of the largest side arms Colt's factory had ever made. The cartridges that studded the belt were nearly as large as Walton's thumb.

When Gulliver turned, Whiz got a full view of his face. The thick eyebrows were joined to make a solid hedge at the base of a sloping forehead. Gulliver's nose must have been broken, not once, but many times. Generally speaking, it was flattened out. Beyond that simple statement it defied description. The big man's mouth was wide and distorted by several old scars. Gulliver was unquestionably a rugged-looking man.

The columnist wondered if this man, at some time in the past, had stuck his head between a battering ram and the heels of a Missouri mule.

Tom Quest said, "This is Gulliver." To Gulliver he said, "I met Whiz Walton on the train. He's a newspaper man. He knew my father."

"We heard you coming," said Whiz dryly, extending his hand. "That car of yours is a little noisy."

"Yo' should've been around before I had 'er tightened up," replied Gulliver. "That's when she sounded real lively. What's that yo' said about Tom's pa?"

"I interviewed him years ago. And I'm mighty interested in what Tom has told me about his disappearance."

"Whiz Walton's going to travel with us," put in Tom.

Gulliver half closed one eye and studied the reporter appraisingly. "I dunno," he muttered dubiously. "Looks kind o' paper-backed to me."

"Paper—" Whiz left his angry retort suspended. He realized that Gulliver meant no offense. This was simply a matter-of-fact appraisal. "Make up your mind, Gulliver. Are you going to be hard to handle?"

The big man's eyes went wide. "Meanin' yo' figure to handle me?"

"Oh, be yourself," smiled Whiz, "and let's get going."

A slow grin spread over the big man's face. "Spunk," he muttered. He turned to Tom and said, "Yo' pal's got spunk, an' that's what I like." To Whiz he said, "Yo'll do, son. Shake hands. I'm glad to know yo'."

A sudden interruption cut off the newshound's reply. It was a high-pitched, reedy voice that came from a window of the house across the tracks.

"You howlin' tornado, what's the idea makin' all that noise an' bustin' people outta their sleep?" Zeb Oliphant's thin face was framed by chin whiskers and a nightcap. "Dad-rat it, Gulliver," he went on, "why in tarnation can't you come to town without unravelin' car-

tridges an' yowlin' loud enough to drive a wolf to suicide?"

"It's time to git up, yo' lazy ole coot," drawled Gulliver in a voice that shook the windows and grated on Whiz Walton's spine. "Don't yo' know that people die in bed? Git over here on the double. I gotta ask yo' some questions."

"I won't do no such thing. I'm goin' back to bed. You stop makin' so much noise an' clear out before I git my shotgun."

"Yo' go right ahead," suggested Gulliver. "Yo' go git that shotgun an' I'll come over there an' skin yo' down so's yo' can use the gun bar'l for a bathtub!"

The window banged shut.

Gulliver, quite unruffled, turned to Whiz and said, "Now where was we at?"

"I—uh—I was just saying that I was glad to meet you, Gulliver—*all* of you."

"Yo' aim to travel with me an' Tom?"

The reporter nodded. "I met Hamilton Quest before he started on that expedition," he said. "If there's any news about him, I want it."

Gulliver looked rather dubious. "I dunno," he murmured. "We'll have some downright rough travelin' to do."

"Horseback?"

"Nope. We're travelin' in my jeep." Gulliver pointed to the car. "That there shebang has a way o' buckin' straightaway that'd put a bronc to shame," he finished proudly.

"I've ridden in New York taxicabs. I'll stay with you."

Gulliver scratched his cheek reflectively with the spade-like nail of his left thumb. An oversize ring on one finger picked up and reflected the gleam of the jeep's headlights. It was the companion piece to the ring Tom Quest wore, mounted with the spiral of Archimedes.

"We'll take yo' with us," he decided, "but yo'll have to hang on tight so's yo' don't git unloaded. Travelin' cross country ain't like travelin' on a road."

"Can't you get where you're going by road?" demanded Whiz Walton.

"I reckon maybe it could be done."

"Then why not use the road? What've you got against highways?"

Gulliver snorted disgustedly. "The critters that lay out roads don't know enough to drive a nail in a snowbank. Take it from my ranch to here. It's fifty-seven miles follerin' the turns in the road. It ain't but fifty miles as the crow flies. Any blame fool knows that a straight line's the shortest distance between two points. That's my style."

Whiz had seen proof of that statement in the way Gulliver had scrambled past the steering wheel and over the hood of the jeep to reach the platform. It would have been farther by several feet to use the door of the jeep. Obstacles, to Gulliver, simply did not exist. To him, a straight line was indeed the shortest distance between two points.

"That," Whiz observed, referring to Gulliver's statement, "sounds like a quotation by Hamilton Quest."

Gulliver beamed delightedly. "Yo're right!" he exclaimed. "I *did* git that idea from Hamilton Quest. The fact that yo' recognized it as comin' from him is proof yo' knowed him. Throw yo' suitcase aboard an' we'll git gittin' right away."

CHAPTER 7

A Cold Trail

DAYLIGHT was well advanced when Tom Quest climbed into the jeep to rearrange the cargo and make room for his own and Whiz Walton's suitcases. He noticed that Gulliver had stocked up for almost any contingency.

There were cans of extra gasoline and oil and a can that was labeled "Water for car only." A tin box served as the larder. It held flour, salt, baking powder, bacon, salt pork and other staples, including the condiments that Gulliver favored and a supply of frijoles. There were other boxes and cases of assorted sizes. Gulliver despised soft drinks, which he called "fizzle water," but he had brought along a case of them for Tom. Miscellaneous equipment littered the floor of the jeep.

Gulliver and Whiz Walton stood on the station platform chatting while they waited for the jeep to be loaded. Tom was pleased to observe that they seemed to have struck up a friendship.

"You said you had some trouble getting here," said Whiz.

"It was the galoot that runs the store over near my place," explained Gulliver. "The critter makes a habit o' general cussedness. I needed some things but he argued it was midnight an' he was in bed with the store locked up."

"What'd you do?"

"Me? I argued right back. I had to fit the bar'l o' my six-gun agin his headpiece. Trouble was, I didn't know his skull was so thin. I wasted half an hour waitin' till he got conscious again." Gulliver chuckled. "When that gent come to, he was as surprised as a dog with his first porcupine."

"Then he unlocked the store for you?"

"Uh-huh, he unlocked it all right."

Whiz began to understand Gulliver. "Why didn't you rap on the door with your knuckles?" he asked. "That would have smashed the lock. Then you could have helped yourself and left a note and the cash to pay for the stuff."

"Aw-w," drawled Gulliver, "I wouldn't want to bust Pete's lock."

"No, I suppose not," agreed the reporter. "It was considerate of you to bust his head instead. New locks cost money."

Gulliver nodded and turned toward the jeep. "How're yo' comin', Tom?" he called.

"It'll be crowded, but I guess we can make it." Tom straightened up in the car. "What happened to your windshield?" he asked.

"Blame thing kept gittin' in my way. I busted two of 'em by takin' quick shots at jack rabbits. Then I figured that a windshield warn't no good anyhow, so I left 'er out. A little fresh air never hurt no one."

Tom Quest finally got the suitcases stowed away and climbed out of the jeep. "We're all set," he told Gulliver.

"Can't go till I talk to Zeb. I gotta find out where in blazes we're goin'."

"Don't you know?"

"Not for sure. It's a place called Horsehead, but I ain't sure how to git there."

"How about looking it up on a map?" suggested Whiz Walton.

"I already done that same. I looked on half a dozen different maps an' the doggone town don't show on none o' them."

"Gulliver, are you sure of the name?"

"Sure I'm sure, Tom!" Gulliver fumbled in the chest pocket of his dark shirt and pulled out a folded telegram. "Yo' remember, boy, how I writ you that I got wind of yo' pa's friend bein' back in the States. Well, since then I had this message."

As he talked he unfolded a piece of yellow paper that much handling had made limp and grimy. Tom read the words of the telegram, then passed the wrinkled sheet to Whiz who read it aloud:

"MY HUSBAND AND DAUGHTER BARBARA SEVENTEEN LEFT OUR HOME HERE THREE WEEKS AGO BY CAR TO VISIT YOU AND TO INSPECT SOME MINING PROPERTIES IN NEAR-BY

TOWN OF HORSEHEAD. HAVE HEARD NOTHING FROM THEM SINCE. GREATLY WORRIED. COULD YOU TRY TO TRACE THEM. MY AIRMAIL LETTER ADDRESSED TO HORSEHEAD WAS RETURNED MARKED NO SUCH POST OFFICE. PLEASE HELP ME IF YOU CAN. OTHERWISE MUST ENGAGE DETECTIVE.

MARTHA HANFORD

The telegram bore the address, Dane, Florida, and the date of three days before.

"How do you figure this, Gulliver?" asked Tom excitedly. "Where could the Hanfords be? This wire was sent three weeks after Mr. Hanford left Florida."

Gulliver stroked his jaw. "He got married just before startin' on the expedition ten years ago," he said slowly. "He married him a widow woman with a young 'un. But what beats me is why he should light out with his stepchild an' never git word back to his missus. Don't sound like the Hanford I knowed an' who was yo' pa's best friend."

"Seems to me that if there is a place called Horsehead in this part of the state, you'd know about it, Gulliver."

"I ain't too sure," replied the big man. "Seems to me I heard of a place o' that name when I first come here. I gotta ask Zeb. He'll know. We can ask him if he seen a city feller an' a gal in a car round here, too."

"Here's your chance," said Whiz, pointing across the tracks. "Here he comes and he seems to be geared for trouble."

The lean old man had stuffed his nightshirt into trou-

sers which, in turn, were tucked into boots that came halfway to the knees. He wore a scowl on his face and fairly bristled as he crossed the tracks.

A few yards from the platform Zeb picked up the argument right where he had left it when he slammed the window. "Gulliver," he shrilled, "if you gotta come to town when decent folks are sleepin', you got to do it quiet! I won't stand for you caterwaulin' around here in the middle of the night."

Without pausing, the old man dropped his voice to a tone of cordiality and said, "Howdy, Tom. I'm downright glad to see you." He resumed his tirade before Tom could reply. "Yo're nothin' but an oversize lummox with too much whoop an' holler. What you need is a good lambastin'! One o' these days—" Zeb broke off with a grunt as he tried to negotiate a thirty-inch step to the platform.

Gulliver placed his hands beneath Zeb's arms and lifted him to his side.

Zeb went right on talking. "—one o' these days I'm goin' to push your face so hard you'll be able to scratch the back o' your neck with your front teeth!"

Tom chuckled at the fiery old man. The scene reminded him of a small dog yipping at the heels of a tolerant great Dane.

"Aw, now, Zebediah," Gulliver said placatingly when the little station master was finished, "yo' shouldn't talk like that to me. Yo' know I never meant no harm. Now stop yo' yappin' an' see what I brought yo' from the store near my ranch."

Gulliver drew a slightly flattened paper sack from his

pocket and handed it to Zeb. "Gumdrops," he explained.

"Green ones?"

"Uh-huh. That's the kind yo' like best. They might be mashed up an' stuck together a little, but that don't change the flavor none."

Zeb stuffed the bag into his hip pocket and muttered, "Thanks. I'll take 'em, but what I said still goes. You got to stop whoopin' it up when you come here at night. This is the third time you done it in the past three years, an' it's gettin' downright tiresome."

Having had the final word, the old man calmed down and let the talk drop into a normal channel. Tom introduced Whiz Walton and answered a few questions concerning the reporter. He thanked Zeb for the pitcher of milk and inquired about the health of Zeb's wife. Then he brought up the subject of Horsehead and of John Hanford.

"Horsehead? O' course there's a Horsehead," shouted Zeb. "If you'd stay to home once in a while you'd know somethin' about Texas."

"Well, then, why don't yo' tell the guvment? They don't know o' no post office name o' Horsehead," bellowed Gulliver.

"Just 'cause you and the guvment is ignorant don't mean nothin'," yelped Zeb. "Horsehead is a ghost town over on the Fork near where the state's been buildin' the new jailhouse."

"Well, yo' don't have to yell at a man," said Gulliver. Then in a softer voice he inquired, "Zeb, in the last week or two did a feller come through here in a car? Tall, thin

feller with a filly about Tom's age along with him?"

Zeb pretended to try to recollect all of the events of the past few weeks. After a decent interval he gave his head a final scratch and said:

"Seems to me there was a tall, skinny city feller through here a couple o' weeks past. He had his daughter with him. Least he said it was his daughter. Didn't look no more like him than a bluebonnet looks like a cactus."

"She purty?" queried Gulliver.

"Well," Zeb said uncertainly, "she had a purty face an' her hair was nice an' soft lookin', but she was a mite on the lean side. She didn't look like she'd be up to diggin' taters all day or follerin' a team with the plow."

"A shemale don't have to look like a squaw to be purty," Gulliver argued. As an afterthought he muttered, "I wish I'd brought along my necktie."

"When did Hanford and his stepdaughter arrive?" asked Tom.

Zeb scratched the fringe of thin, gray hair that bordered his bald head. "Lemme see," he pondered. "They got here at nine in the A.M. That'd be the Monday train. Warn't last Monday—must have been two weeks—that's when it was. Two weeks ago last Monday."

"And they went on to Horsehead?"

"Yup."

"Did Hanford say what he was going to do there?"

"I asked him if he was goin' to work at the jail, that's about a quarter of a mile from where the town was, an' he didn't exactly say. As I remember, he didn't say much of anythin'." The station master shook his head slowly.

"I've been thinkin' him over," he said. "I can't figure what a man like that would be doin' in a place like Horsehead."

"Why not?" demanded Whiz Walton. "What's puzzling about going to the town of Horsehead for a job?"

"The thing is," replied Zeb, "there ain't no town."

"No town?"

"Nothin' left but the old hotel an' even that's most all stove-in. The other buildings was all tore down some time ago an' the wood an' stone was used to build the new jail."

"Are you sure?" asked Whiz.

"I got the true facts from Lem Smiley an' he should know. He offered to go along with Hanford an' the girl to show 'em how to get to Horsehead. He didn't git back here till the next day. He got a ride back with a feller from up north. I asked him if there was anythin' new an' he said there wasn't. Horsehead's nothin' but a ghost town."

"I'd like to talk to Lem Smiley," said Tom.

"Can't do that unless you wait around here till he gets back. Lem's gone away on a huntin' trip."

"A hunting trip?"

"Yup. First time in his life. I don't know what got into Lem to make him want to go huntin', but that's where he's gone an' he didn't say when he'd be back."

"When did he leave?" asked Tom.

"The day he got back from Horsehead. D'you want to wait around?"

"Not on yo' life," roared Gulliver. "Yo' just tell us how we get to Horsehead an' we'll see things for ourself!"

Zeb gave carefully detailed instructions which Tom Quest noted on a small pad.

"You just foller them directions," the old man finished, "an' you can't go wrong."

Tom nodded. "I guess we can find it," he said. He turned to Gulliver. "Are we all set to go?"

Gulliver nodded. "I hanker to see that there ghost town," he said. "Let's git gittin'!"

CHAPTER 8

Questions Without Answers

Tom Quest glanced at the directions in his notebook, then pointed south along the highway and said, "We start out that way."

"Is Horsehead on that there road?" demanded Gulliver.

"No. We follow the road until—"

"Never yo' mind follerin' no road," broke in the big man. "Yo' just point right straight to Horsehead an' that's how we go. We'll save time by cuttin' beeline acrost the plain."

Tom had traveled in a bouncing buckboard on one of Gulliver's beeline trips. Such a trip in the jeep with the throttle wide open would be even more bruising and it

was a trip to be avoided if possible. "We might get lost," he said. "Perhaps we better follow the directions just as Zeb gave them to us."

"Aw-w, now, Tom," argued Gulliver, "there ain't no sense in checker-boardin' sideways."

"Wait, Gulliver," Tom lowered his voice, "Whiz Walton might not be able to stand the sort of rough riding you're used to."

Whiz turned in the rear seat of the jeep where he had settled himself. "I heard my name," he said. "What are you talking about?"

Tom winked slyly. "I was just telling Gulliver that we'd better stick to the highway instead of cutting cross country." Tom paused meaningly. "Your health, you know, Whiz. You've got to be careful."

Whiz caught Tom's meaning and assumed the expression of a martyr. "Oh," he said, "don't worry about me. I wouldn't want to cause any inconvenience." He paused and looked at Gulliver. "Anyway," he finished, "I can probably stand as much as you."

Gulliver frowned darkly. "Like fun yo' can!"

"Of course there's no great rush," put in Tom Quest.

"Yo're probably right, Tom," Gulliver grudgingly admitted. "I sure admire the spunk of yo' friend in bein' willin' to go along, but maybe it'll be better if we take it kind of easy on his account. I got some stuff in my medicine chest that'd likely fix him up, but we ain't got the time to do it now."

"Or later," determined Whiz inaudibly.

"If we're to follow the road, Tom, yo' better do the

drivin'. I fall asleep on a smooth road when there ain't no jiggle-jammin'."

"That suits me," exclaimed Tom enthusiastically.

He hopped into the driver's seat and moved as far to the left as possible, but even so, Gulliver had to do considerable squirming to settle himself in the space that remained. He fumbled in a compartment for a moment and produced two pairs of sunglasses which he passed to Whiz and Tom.

"Bein' as we got no windshield," he said, "yo'll likely need these here squint-chasers."

"What about you?" asked Tom.

"Humph," snorted Gulliver. "I'm used to gittin' the wind in chunks." He leaned back as far as possible in the cramped quarters, folded his arms and said, "Let 'er go, Tom."

Tom drove slowly at first to get the "feel" of the jeep. The sturdy little car ran smoothly despite a starboard list caused by Gulliver's weight. After a couple of miles, he increased the speed but held it within the bounds of moderation.

"Gulliver," he began after a lengthy pause, "do you think there's a chance that Dad is still alive?"

Gulliver looked at Tom, then at his feet and scratched his chin. His face took on a twisted frown that Tom had learned to associate with mental effort. Presently the big man made his carefully considered reply.

"Tom," he said slowly, "I don't want yo' to git yo' hopes up. Truth of it is, I don't have no more idea than yo' got. We figured that John Hanford an' yo' pa were

killed along with everyone else on that expedition. Now it turns out that Hanford is alive. I'm hopin' he'll be able to tell us somethin'."

"When you wrote him, did you ask if he knew anything about my father?"

"I sure did, but I never got no answer to none o' my letters." Gulliver reached into one of his capacious pockets and brought out the badly smudged telegram from Mrs. Hanford. "Didn't I show yo' this telegram?" he inquired.

"I read it."

"If yo' want to read it again, I'll hold the wheel."

"No, thanks, Gulliver. I remember what she said."

"Do you mind if I read it again?" asked Whiz Walton from the rear seat.

"Go ahead," said Gulliver, passing the folded yellow paper over his shoulder. "But be careful how yo' handle it. The paper has got sort o' pulin'."

The reporter held the telegram close to the floor to escape the fifty-mile gale that swept the car. Meanwhile, Gulliver went on speaking to Tom.

"I don't even know how long Hanford's been back in this country," he said. "The first I knowed about him was a couple o' months ago. There was a picture in the paper. It was a picture o' some natives an' a white man that looked like Hanford. When I seen it, I went to the newspaper office an' I got some copies o' the picture. They're the ones I sent to yo'."

"Then what did you do?"

"Well, I done some investigatin' an' I found out that

it really was John Hanford. He'd come out o' the jungle with the man that took the picture."

Whiz Walton had finished rereading the telegram. He folded it slowly as he said, "Hanford had been back in the States for some time before you contacted him."

"Uh-huh."

"Did he know where to reach you?"

Gulliver shrugged his massive shoulders.

"How did you reach him?"

"I sent the letter to the Explorers' Club in New York. I figured they'd likely know where he was if anyone did. They must've sent my letter to him where he was livin' in Floridy."

"Could he have located you through the Explorers' Club?"

"I reckon so. But he likely didn't think of it."

"Doesn't it seem pretty funny to you, Gulliver, that a man you knew as well as you knew Hanford, and who must know what happened to the man who was your mutual friend, didn't get in touch with you and Tom the minute he landed back in the U.S.A.?"

"Well," said Gulliver after a long pause, "maybe he was too sick to do anythin' about it."

"He seems to be well enough to drive around the country with his wife's daughter," retorted the reporter.

"What yo' drivin' at, Whiz?" boomed Gulliver. "I'm just as sure as we're settin' here that Hanford had his reasons. Maybe he intended to see me when he an' Barbary drove over here."

"Zeb didn't say anything about their asking about you," muttered Whiz.

"Well, Whiz, we'll soon know," said Tom quickly.

The newshound liked the easy use of his nickname and the way in which Gulliver had answered his questions. It made him feel that he had been accepted as a full-fledged member of the expedition. He leaned well forward with his elbows resting on his knees. "Let me get the facts straight," he said. "You and Hamilton Quest were good friends long before you went on that trip to South America, weren't you?"

"We was friends before Hamilton got married. We got separated for a couple o' years, but when he lined up the expedition, he sent for me to go along. That's when I first met up with John Hanford."

"Were you and Hanford friendly on the expedition?" asked Whiz.

"Son, when yo're in that jungle head-hunter country, yo' just gotta be friendly. Me an' Hanford shared the same tent."

"What about Quest?"

"He an' Mrs. Quest an' the button had a tent right next to ours."

"Button?"

"Meanin' Tom. He was about seven." Gulliver looked at Tom and chuckled. "Do yo' remember the time when Hanford got riled up at yo'?"

Tom grinned.

"What about?" asked Whiz.

"Tom had a toy rifle down there in the jungle. So one day he got hold o' Hanford's survey telescope an' tried to rig it on his rifle for a telescope sight like we had on the huntin' hardware. Hanford was fit to be tied." Gulliver

chuckled reminiscently and then grew sober. "It warn't long after that when Tom's mother died." He paused. "She sure was a fine woman. One o' the spunkiest I ever seen. I'll never forgit the way she sewed up my arm with a needle an' thread when I got it opened up by a native with a machete. It was a mighty ugly-lookin' wound, but that didn't stop 'er. Not for a minute!"

"I don't get it," the reporter said flatly.

"Yo' don't git what?"

"I can't understand why Hanford didn't try to find you and Tom as soon as he got out of the jungle."

"Neither can I," added Tom.

"Or why he didn't answer your question about Hamilton Quest. He must have known something about him. Is there any reason why Hanford wouldn't want to see you?"

"He's goin' to see me. Whether he wants to or not." There was an edge in Gulliver's voice. "Me an' him was friendly enough down there in the jungle, but we never was partners like with Hamilton Quest. Maybe he just didn't know how to break the news—"

"Do you," probed the reporter, "think he has something to hide?"

"Don't yo' go to hintin' things agin John Hanford," Gulliver warned. "He was a friend o' Hamilton Quest an' that's good enough for me."

"All right, Gulliver," the reporter replied. "Don't lay your ears back."

The car moved over the smooth road, covering several miles in comparative quiet. Gulliver's hint of resentment

had, for the time being, at least, put an end to Whiz Walton's questions. Tom Quest stepped up the speed. He enjoyed the rushing wind against his face and past his ears. It seemed to shut out all things around him and enclose his thoughts in a small space. He thought of Hanford's odd behavior. He tried to place himself in the engineer's situation. He projected himself. He was in Florida, resting, regaining lost weight, trying to forget the perils of a decade among savages. What would he have done? How would he have replied to Gulliver's letter? Why would he suddenly leave Florida and a well-earned rest to go to a ghost town in Texas? Why would he take his stepdaughter and not his wife? Why did he want to drop out of sight? And then Tom thought of Lem and his sudden departure on a hunting trip, and wondered if the trip had been inspired by something Lem had learned during the trip to Horsehead. And if Lem had found out something that struck him as queer in the ghost town, why hadn't he brought the sheriff into the picture? Was his "hunting trip" taking him back to Horsehead?

Questions without answers churned in Tom's mind. There were a lot of questions, piled one atop the other, but there were two that stood out in bold relief and made all other points seem insignificant. "Is my father dead or alive? Does John Hanford know the answer?"

Thirty miles were covered in the next half hour. Then Whiz Walton roused from a state of languor. "Don't people eat in Texas?" he demanded.

Gulliver opened his eyes and squirmed in the seat to face the reporter. "Ain't yo' et?"

"Neither Tom nor I have had anything but a cup of milk since yesterday."

"That's downright foolish. Yo' shouldn't try to go without eatin'."

"Can't eat what you can't see, and we haven't seen any food."

"I got all manner o' fixin's here in the car," Gulliver announced. "Trouble is, we're stowed in so tight I can't git at 'em till we stop. Yo' should've spoke up before we set out from Bliss."

"How was I to know you had food in this puddle jumper?" Whiz demanded hotly. "I'm no mind reader."

"Don't apologize," Gulliver consoled. "A man can't be everythin'. Me, I ain't no mind reader neither, but yo' don't hear me apologizin' for my lack."

"I'm not apologizing!"

"Now, now," rumbled Gulliver in the voice a parent might use to an unreasonable child, "don't git yo' bristles up." He turned to Tom and said, "I don't know much about the roads. I don't use 'em frequent. Where we at?"

"We just passed the road that leads to the Double Bar outfit."

"What'd Zeb say was the next spread?"

"The next place belongs to Limpy Martin."

"That's the critter that lives alone?"

Tom nodded. "His house will be on our left."

Gulliver turned. "Yo' can relax," he told Whiz Walton. "We'll stop at the next house an' fix up some grub."

"I'll be watching for the house."

"Oh, there ain't no hurry about that," replied Gulliver.

"Yo' can take a nap if yo' want to. People around here don't like to huddle too close to one another."

Whiz Walton could hardly suppress a groan. "How far is it?" he inquired, determined to know the worst.

"Yo' just relax. We'll be there in two whoops an' a holler."

"What's that mean?"

" 'Bout noon."

"Two hours!" And this time Whiz made no effort to conceal his groan. Then something caught his eye. It was the sun reflecting from the heavy ring on the hand that Gulliver dangled over the back of the seat.

"That ring," said the reporter, "reminds me of the pictures you sent Tom."

"Did Tom tell yo' how him an' me happen to be wearin' these rings?"

"Yeah. He gave me all the details when he showed me the pictures. Have you any idea how the Indian got hold of the brooch?"

Gulliver shook his head.

"Didn't Hamilton Quest have it when you and Tom left the jungle?"

Gulliver said, "He sure did an' he wouldn't part with it for anythin'!"

"If the native got it from Quest, that native must have known something about Tom's father."

"That makes sense."

"Hanford's in the picture with the Indians. He certainly must have asked about the brooch. He must know about Tom's father."

"Yo' keep askin' questions about John Hanford," Gul-

liver complained. "I dunno no more about things than yo' do. I never seen Hanford before we met on that trip. All I know is that he was an engineer an' said to be a good one. He never talked much about himself. Fact is, he never talked much. Me, I'll rear up in his defense because Hamilton Quest liked him. Same way I'm for yo' because Tom says yo're okay. Yo' just save up yo' questions till we get to Horsehead an' see Hanford. Then yo' can cut loose with all the doggoned questions yo' want. What's more," the big man finished firmly, "I'll see that yo' questions git answered."

The reporter pricked up his ears at the tone that came into Gulliver's voice. "Do you," he demanded, "mean to say you'll get tough with Hanford if he doesn't feel like talking?"

"I had Tom come all the way here from New York so's him an' me could find out if Hanford knows anythin' that'll help us find Tom's father. Dead or alive, we aim to find him, an' if Hanford knows anythin', he's goin' to talk or—"

"Or what?"

"He," said Gulliver simply, "is goin' to talk."

CHAPTER 9

The Strange Actions of Lem Smiley

THE SUN was almost directly overhead in a cloudless sky when Tom Quest swung the jeep into a couple of ruts that served as a driveway alongside Limpy Martin's house.

It was a small, one-story building sheathed with unpainted clapboards. Tall grass and weeds grew close to the front door. Two paths through the weeds showed that a door on the side was the one most used. One of these paths led to a vegetable garden in the rear while the other went to a barn that stood next to the garden.

Tom stopped next to the house and stepped from the jeep. His legs were a little stiff and his face, despite a coat of tan, was sensitive from wind and sun. But it was not as badly burned as Whiz Walton's.

The reporter spoke in a rueful tone. "My face," he said, "feels as if it had been barbecued. Is the sun always like this in Texas?" His pale complexion had undergone a transformation. The skin was red and shiny. It looked tightly drawn. Whiz felt it gingerly. "My next shave is going to be a painful operation," he muttered. "It'll be a lulu."

Gulliver stepped close and squinted at the sunburned skin. "Yo' know," he said consolingly, "I've et beef that warn't cooked that much. But don't yo' worry. I got some stuff in my medicine chest that'll fix yo' up."

"Someone's coming," called Tom. "Maybe it's the man who owns this place."

"What'd Zeb say his name was?"

"Limpy Martin."

One of Limpy Martin's legs seemed to be an inch or two shorter than the other. He came from the garden patch leaning heavily on a cane. Limpy was a man of nondescript appearance, wearing faded dungarees, a frayed straw hat and a week's growth of gray beard. A wide and friendly grin broke his weather-beaten face into a network of deep wrinkles.

"Welcome," he called as he hobbled close and stuck out his right hand. "My name's Martin."

"Glad to know you," Tom gripped the farmer's hand. "My name is Tom Quest. This is my friend Gulliver and this is Whiz Walton."

Limpy's hearty handshakes that went with the introductions made the visitors feel welcome.

"We don't aim to stay long," Gulliver explained.

"Only long enough to fix some grub an' ask a couple o' questions. We got our own food with us. We can fix it right here in the driveway."

"You'll do no such thing," declared Martin. "There's no need to unpack your stuff. When men come to my place I feed 'em."

"We don't want to put you to any trouble," objected Tom.

"No trouble at all. I got a great big pot o' rabbit stew heatin' on the stove. It's prime eatin'."

Gulliver said, "There ain't no call for yo' to feed us."

Whiz Walton nudged Gulliver. Rabbit stew was one of the reporter's favorite dishes. In his present half-starved condition, mere mention of it nearly made him drool. "Gulliver," he said, "let's not argue."

Gulliver shrugged his shoulders and said, "All right, Martin. Fetch on yo' rabbit stew."

Limpy grinned and led the way inside.

The aroma that rose from a simmering kettle filled the room and brought a murmur of appreciation from Whiz Walton.

"The grub's all cooked," Martin said. "While I dish it up, you gents can be gettin' out the tools an' cups. Forks an' spoons are in the table drawer an' cups are on the shelf."

Tom placed four cups on the table while Whiz opened the drawer and took out a handful of silverware. "What about knives?" he inquired.

Gulliver was at the stove studying the contents of the kettle with an appraising eye. He looked up disgustedly

at Whiz. "Why yo' needin' a knife?" he demanded. "Yo' got teeth, ain't yo'?"

"You won't need a knife for this chuck," Martin said proudly. "The meat in this stew can be cut with a fork."

"Sounds pulin'," muttered Gulliver, then in an undertone added, "paper-backed. I like meat that takes some chewin'."

Limpy ladled the rabbit stew from the big iron kettle on the stove to tin plates, then filled a bowl with a reserve supply and placed it conveniently near the head of the table.

The stew was a delicious concoction containing all manner of vegetables and an abundance of tender meat in gravy that had been thickened by hours of simmering.

Whiz Walton ate slowly despite his hunger. He savored each mouthful as if to extract the last full measure of delicate flavor in the manner of a gastronome. Gulliver was different. He emptied his plate in short order and passed it to Limpy for a refill.

"Food like this," he said apologetically, "don't take much chewin', but it goes down easy."

"You like my cookin', eh?" Limpy grinned.

"It'll hold me," Gulliver replied, "but it don't have much authority. Me, I like vittles yo' can feel when they go down. Now what yo' should do is throw in some hot sauce an' hot peppers an' stuff o' that sort." He turned to Whiz. "Just yo' wait till yo' set down to *my* cookin'," he said. "It's downright lively. It lets yo' stomach know that yo' teeth ain't layin' down on the job."

"This," replied Whiz, "hits the spot."

There was pie and coffee and after that Gulliver leaned back in his chair, loosened his belt a couple of notches, and belched.

"We oughtta git gittin'," he said.

"You goin' far?" asked Limpy Martin.

"Horsehead," replied Gulliver.

The word had an amazing effect on their host. He seemed to go pale beneath his tan. His eyes opened wide and a strange look came into his face. "The—the ghost town," he said hollowly.

"What about it?" demanded Tom Quest. "Is there anything curious about an abandoned town?"

"There's somethin' mighty curious about Horsehead."

"What is it?"

Martin shook his head slowly. "I don't know," he said. "I wish I could tell you, but I can't."

"Why do you say there's something curious?"

"A couple of weeks ago, Lem Smiley came past here in a car with a man and a girl. They was goin' to Horsehead."

"We know about that."

"That was John Hanford," added Gulliver. "He had his stepdaughter along with him."

"He went by the regular road, which is about ten miles farther than the old overgrown trail they used when they was buildin' the prison, about a quarter of a mile from the town. The next day, real early in the mornin', Lem was on his way back to Bliss. He was ridin' with a stranger who was givin' him a lift. While they stopped here for water, he told me he'd left the man an' the girl at Horsehead an' spent the night camped just this side o' the

hotel on the crick. He was startin' to hoof it back in the mornin' when the feller picked him up. He shoved on an' I thought no more about it until late afternoon o' the same day."

"Then what happened?"

"Lem was back here. This time he was drivin' his own car. He said he was goin' to leave the jalopy with me an' use the old trail to get to Horsehead."

"Why didn't he take his car?"

"Couldn't. Not if he was bound to take the old trail. Between here an' the ghost town the country gets pretty rugged. There's one place in the trail where it's narrow with a drop on one side an' a cliff on the other. A boulder's fallen there an' blocked the trail. Lem insisted he *had* to go that way, even if it meant travelin' on foot. If you know Lem, you don't ask questions about anythin' that ain't your business. So he left his car in my barn an' started walkin'. I ain't seen him since. His car is still here."

"Did Lem Smiley say why he wanted to go back to Horsehead?" asked Tom.

Limpy Martin nodded solemnly and said, "Yes. He did!"

"Why?"

"He wanted to find out about a queer rumblin' he'd heard in the earth and about a woman that sobbed at night!"

CHAPTER 10

Whiz Knows His Hardware

LEM SMILEY'S ancient touring car had originally been a Buick, but replacements of worn-out parts had come from so many different makes and models that the article in Martin's barn bore little resemblance to the machine that had rolled off the production line in 1926. Whiz Walton identified lights and accessories from cars that were obsolete when Tom Quest was born. Maxwell and Kissel had contributed. The steering wheel had once been on a Pierce-Arrow. Other makes also were represented.

Whiz Walton and Tom examined all parts of the machine, poking into pockets and compartments and beneath the leather seats.

Limpy Martin had been able to tell little about Lem Smiley. Lem said he had heard a woman sobbing in the night, and a peculiar rumbling in the ground when he camped near the town of Horsehead. He was evidently returning to investigate. Martin knew no more.

"I don't get it," said Whiz as he pawed an assortment of tools and old inner tubes beneath the rear seat. "If the guy who owns this car wanted to find out more about a sobbing woman, why didn't he stay where he was? Why did he go back to Bliss and cook up a story about a hunting trip?"

"Golly, Whiz, I don't know. I've been wondering the same thing." Tom closed the car door. "Maybe there was something in Bliss he wanted to get."

"Could be."

"But even so, why didn't he say he was going back to Horsehead?"

Whiz snapped his fingers. "I get it!" he said.

"What?"

"Hunting trip! What does a guy take on a hunting trip?"

"A rifle, doesn't he?"

"Sure. If he had gone to Bliss to get a rifle and said he was returning to Horsehead, he would have stirred up a hullabaloo. A phony hunting trip gave him an excuse to leave Bliss with a rifle."

"But, Whiz, why do you suppose he's returned to Horsehead with a rifle? Why did he leave the car here and use the old road?"

"That's easy. He didn't want to be seen."

"The rifle means he thought he'd need protection. He must have suspected there'd be danger."

The reporter nodded. "He's been gone a long time. Maybe he found more trouble than he could handle. I don't know what we were looking for, but I thought we might turn up something that'd give us more of a line on Smiley."

Tom looked through the open doors of the barn and saw Gulliver and Limpy Martin standing at the side of the jeep.

"We'd better join them," he said. "Gulliver will be getting restless."

"He's quite a guy," observed Whiz Walton.

"He's the most loyal man I ever knew."

"And the most honest . . . in his own way."

Gulliver looked up and called, "Did yo' find anythin'?"

Tom shook his head.

"I told yo' there was no use piddle-paddlin' around that stove-in junk on wheels. It was just a waste o' good time that should've been used to git us closer to Horsehead."

"It was my idea," Whiz said. "I thought we might dig up some sort of clue if we examined Smiley's car."

"It's John Hanford we're interested in. Not Lem Smiley. An' besides, we're more likely to learn about Smiley if we go to where he was when he heard them noises in the night. Now pile in an' let's git gittin'."

"Check," said Whiz.

"From here on it's likely to be rough goin'," Gulliver announced. "I'll drive."

Tom referred to the notebook. "According to Zeb's instructions," he said, "we stay on the same road."

"Accordin' to *me*," said Gulliver, "we *don't*. Yo' can put that book away, Tom. We're done with it. The old trail is ten miles shorter. We're goin' that way."

Limpy Martin said, "That road is blocked by a boulder. I told you about it."

"Lem Smiley went that way." Gulliver sounded stubborn.

"But he went on foot."

"Well, we ain't goin' on foot. We're goin' in my jeep."

"How do you expect to get the jeep past the boulder?" demanded Whiz.

"We'll take care o' that boulder when we git up to it."

The columnist threw out his hands as if to say, "Have it your way," and started to board the jeep.

"Hold on, Whiz," Gulliver said. "Before you git aboard, I'd better git some hardware out o' the car."

Reaching in, he fumbled around the floor until he found a gun belt with holster and pistol. He handed it to the reporter.

"Wrap yo' hips in this," he said. "There's no tellin' what we're gittin' into."

"What about Tom?" asked Whiz. "Haven't you any hardware for him?"

"I'll do the shootin' for Tom," replied Gulliver shortly. "Not that he couldn't if it came to a pinch. When I learn somebody to shoot he stays learned." He took the cartridge belt from the reporter. "Lemme put that on for yo'," he said.

"Is this the only other gun you have?"

"Uh-huh," grunted Gulliver, buckling the belt around Whiz Walton's hips. "If I'd knowed yo' was comin', I'd o' tried to find a thirty-two or a thirty-eight for yo'. O' course, none o' the boys around here would admit to ownin' such a lightweight beanshooter. But I might o' been able to borrow one from a girl."

Whiz Walton's mouth twitched peculiarly as he winked at Tom. "I didn't mean a lighter gun," he said.

"No?" Gulliver's voice held a rumble. "What sort o' weapons yo' used to?"

"I'm at my best with a submachine gun."

"Huh?" Gulliver's voice went hollow. "A—a submachine gun?"

"Sure. One like I used when I went out with the cops to cover the capture of the Killer Milroy gang in Metropolitan Harbor. *That's* the kind of hardware *you* should have, Gulliver. With a submachine gun, I could write my name in a wooden fence before you could fan six shots from one of these old-fashioned horse pistols."

Gulliver didn't seem to grasp the kidding tone in the reporter's voice. "Horse pistols!" he retorted. He glowered like a thunderhead. "Now yo' see here! I'll have yo' know that my guns—"

"Oh, don't apologize," cut in the newshound, eying the gun disdainfully.

"Apologize! Why, yo'—"

"If this is the best you have, I'll make it do." Whiz brought the gun up suddenly and snapped a shot toward the rear of the house. A tomato can that had been lying

on the ground twenty yards away came suddenly to life, leaping several feet in the air.

"Yo' hit it!" exclaimed Gulliver.

"Good shot," Limpy Martin said admiringly.

"Not so good," complained Whiz. "I didn't hit it dead center." He glanced at the gun. "Maybe this pistol isn't accurate." He dropped it in the holster, adding, "But I'll make it do."

Gulliver took off his hat and scratched the back of his head while he squinted slightly, first at Whiz and then at Tom. Gradually his face relaxed into a grin and then he chuckled.

"Called yo' paper-backed," he said. "Maybe I was right, but if so, it must be sandpaper." He turned and climbed into the jeep behind the steering wheel.

"Golly, Whiz," whispered Tom, "that was swell. I didn't know you were a crack shot."

"Just having a little fun with the big guy," replied the reporter. "I used to practice every week with the New York Police Department."

The jeep roared into life as Gulliver stepped on the starter and raced the motor. "Git aboard," he bellowed. Then to Martin, "Thanks for the vittles."

"You're welcome. Come again."

"We'll be back, an' in the meantime if we run into trouble, we can handle it. I got a blame sight more man power with me than I figured. I'm in a horn-tossin' mood an' I aim to spread my loop!"

Tom Quest jumped into the seat beside the driver. Whiz, a little slower, had only one foot inside when the

car shot forward. Gulliver put the wheels into a tight turn that literally threw the reporter into his seat.

"Hang on," shouted Gulliver. The little car took off across the fields, bouncing wildly toward the unused road to Horsehead.

Gulliver had a distinctive style of driving. He simply pushed the accelerator to the floor and held it there. After that, the steering wheel did all the work. He drove with blind faith in the ability of the jeep to hold together.

For a mile, the jeep rode over bumpy pasture land that had never been plowed, bouncing over gopher holes and hummocks. In addition to the up-and-down jolting, there was a constant sidesway as Gulliver dodged between tree stumps and boulders. The steering wheel braced the big man and held him to his seat, but Tom at his side and the reporter in the rear felt as if they were riding bucking broncos.

Gulliver seemed to enjoy the rough going but the same could not be said for the passengers. When the jeep came to the old, unused wagon road, Gulliver wrenched the front wheels in a sharp right-angle turn. Two of the wheels left the ground entirely. For a moment it seemed as if the car would turn over.

Tom, remembering something he had learned about broncobusting, let himself go limp and relaxed in every muscle. Instead of being tensed against each shocking jar, he rolled and rocked with the jeep. But Whiz Walton was having trouble. The floor of the car was literally filled with cans, bags, boxes and junk that flew into the air with every bounce. The luggage and supplies were hopelessly

shuffled and most of it was on top of the reporter's feet.

After a particularly violent bump, Gulliver half turned and bellowed over his shoulder. "How yo' doin' back there?"

"What's the matter with this crate," Whiz shouted in reply. "Why don't you let 'er out? At this rate, we'll be all day getting to Horsehead."

The trail became increasingly worse as it wound through hills. There were places where sharp turns came without warning and other places where the rains had washed deep grooves. Gulliver met each hazard as it came, guiding the car with unruffled calm.

The trail smoothed out. It curved gently in a wide sweep around a mountain. The road at this point was a narrow ledge not much wider than the car. A sheer wall rose on the left and on the other side was an equally sheer drop of a hundred feet or more.

And then a mighty rock loomed dead ahead. Gulliver's feet went down on clutch and brake. The four wheels locked, skidding the tires and scuffing up clouds of dust. Tom was thrown against the dashboard and Whiz Walton lurched against the front seat. The small car stopped abruptly and Gulliver stepped out.

"Pile out, boys," he said. "We're here."

The rock, less than twenty yards ahead, was larger than the jeep itself. It filled the space between the wall and the sharp drop.

"Well, big boy," said Whiz, "you insisted on coming this way. Now what are you going to do? Back down the hill?"

"Not on yo' life!"

"Well, what *are* you going to do? You can't move that rock."

"Who can't?" Gulliver grinned like a schoolboy. "Yo' just watch me."

CHAPTER 11

A Short Cut to Horsehead

WHIZ WALTON put a cigarette between his lips, then used his thumbnail to snap an old-fashioned wooden match into flame.

"Hold that light a second," Gulliver said.

The two stood in the narrow space between the jeep and the wall. Gulliver was bent over, moving things around on the floor of the car.

"Hold that match down here," he said, "so's I can see better."

Whiz touched the match to his cigarette, then lowered the flame. Gulliver pawed among five-gallon gasoline cans and the other things on the floor. He slapped a case of ammunition to one side and shifted boxes, assorted hardware and replacements for various parts of the car.

"Yo' sure kicked things around in here," he complained. "Got everything all shuffled up. Why can't yo' ride quiet an' keep yo' feet still?"

"Of course," retorted Whiz with heavy sarcasm, "your driving had nothing to do with it."

"Hold that match a little lower."

"What are you looking for?"

"We gotta move that rock."

Gulliver found a badly battered cardboard shoe box.

"I got it," he said. He flipped off the lid and extracted two yellow cylinders about ten inches long and an inch in diameter. "Hang on to these," he added, "I gotta find some other stuff."

"Just a minute. I'll start a fresh match." The reporter considered it somewhat risky to hold flame in the midst of gasoline cans, oily rags, ammunition and dynamite, but he didn't say so. He felt that Gulliver was trying to make him show faintheartedness. Well, if that was the case, he'd fix the big man.

"This is dynamite, isn't it?" he asked.

"Uh-huh."

Gulliver located a small box of percussion caps. "Now all we gotta find is fuses. If yo're a little leery about holdin' them sticks o' dynamite, just stick 'em in my hip pocket till I find the fuses."

"What's there to be leery about?" the newshawk demanded.

"Yo' handled dynamite before?"

"When I was a kid, we used it on the Fourth of July instead of firecrackers." Whiz looked over his shoulder on

hearing a chuckle from Tom and winked broadly at him.

Gulliver, bending over the jeep, made no comment. He straightened, holding coiled-up fuse that looked like clothesline and measured out a two-foot length. He cut this with his hunting knife and fitted it with a percussion cap.

He took the dynamite from Whiz and said, "Yo' an' Tom wait right here. I'll go an' take care o' that rock."

Tom chuckled softly as Gulliver lumbered away.

"Gosh, Whiz," he said, "you're the only man I've ever seen who could talk up to Gulliver. You've got him going."

"He'd like to treat me as a tenderfoot," replied the columnist, "and I won't take it."

"You're doing all right. Keep it up."

Gulliver knew how to handle explosives. He split the cardboard that surrounded the dynamite and packed the waxy stuff in a small heap on top of the boulder. He made a small hole and inserted the percussion cap, leaving the fuse trailing. He bedded down the mass with a handful of dirt. Then he scratched a match on the seat of his trousers, lit the fuse, and rejoined his companions.

A dull boom echoed from the surrounding hills. When the acrid fumes had cleared, the boulder had been shattered into pieces small enough to be rolled over the ledge. In a few minutes the road was open.

"Now we can shove on," Gulliver said.

"Just a minute—"

"What is it, Whiz?"

"You and Tom have driven this far. It seems to me that

I should do my part. I'll drive the rest of the way to Horsehead."

Gulliver nodded. "Suits me. Yo' just go right ahead an' drive but yo' got to be a little careful on a road like this. When this here jeep hits rough spots, she just naturally arches up her back like a mule in a hailstorm."

Whiz thought of the nightmarish ride with Gulliver at the wheel and nodded. "That," he agreed soberly, "is a perfect simile."

Tom had brought two bottles of Coca-Cola from the case on the floor.

"I'm thirsty," he said. "Let's wet our whistle before we start." He extended a bottle to Whiz. "Want one?"

"I'd rather have a drink of water."

Tom said, "We haven't any water except what's in the can for the radiator."

"What's the matter with that?"

"Ain't nothin' wrong with it," put in Gulliver, "but it ain't for drinkin'. It's for my jeep. Yo' can find aplenty o' drinkin' water in the streams an' waterholes. It might be a little thick with mud but that don't matter if yo' chew it. I can't use it in the car, though. It clogs."

"In that case, I'll have a coke."

"Well—" Gulliver hesitated. "I reckon we *might* spare a swig." He poured a cupful from the can in the same way that a miser pays out gold. "It's all right this time," he said, "but don't yo' git the habit o' drinkin' my radiator water."

Whiz had his drink, then slid into the driver's seat. Tom got in beside him, while Gulliver climbed into the

rear and kicked the cargo around to make room for his feet.

For half an hour the turning, twisting, narrow road took careful watching. When it widened Whiz relaxed. He cast a quick glance over his shoulder. Gulliver's eyes were closed and his head nodded with the movement of the car.

"Is that guy asleep?" demanded Whiz in surprise.

Tom said, "Yes."

"How in blazes can he sleep on a road like this? How can he relax?"

"Why shouldn't he relax?"

"What if something happened? I might run the car over the ledge. We might blow a tire and go out of control. A wheel might break."

"Gulliver couldn't prevent any of those things by staying awake," Tom said simply.

"No. But even so, I—well, I don't see how he can sleep."

"Gulliver has a knack of relaxing whenever there's a chance. By dozing like this, he can go for days without a real night's sleep. If he could prevent trouble by sitting on the edge of his seat and worrying, he'd do it. But he figures there's no use worrying when it *won't* help."

The driver nodded thoughtfully. "It's a good trick," he said. "I wish I could do it."

"How do you like Gulliver?" asked Tom. "Isn't he great?"

"Great in more ways than one," replied Whiz. "I never saw anything like him." He grinned. "I'd give six months' pay to see him tangle with Demetrius."

Tom laughed at the idea. "He'd handle Demetrius easier than the wrestler handled you."

"You can say that again," agreed Whiz. "I can't imagine anyone powerful enough to handle Gulliver. That's what has me stopped."

"What's that?"

"The guy is so battered up. What happened to him? Did he try to take on the Marines, singlehanded?"

"He used to bulldog steers."

"So that's it."

"He was at Pendleton when he got his worst beating. He got hold of the steer's horns and threw him, but the steer shook loose. There was a pretty wild scuffle. I didn't see it, but they tell me that poor Gulliver was an awful mess when it was over. The doctors took about twenty-five stitches in his face."

Whiz raised his eyebrows. "Must have been laid up for some time," he said.

"You don't know Gulliver."

"Wasn't he?"

"He went out the next day with his face all plastered up and won the Pendleton championship."

The jeep reached the trail's highest point. The view from there was unlike anything that Whiz had ever seen. It was technicolor come to life. It was the awe-inspiring reality of picture post cards and illustrations in fine magazines. It was a view to send an artist into ecstasies. It even brought a gasp from the cynical reporter who thought he had seen everything.

He stopped the car to take a longer look. Beyond the edge of the road the cliff dropped for two hundred feet or

more. Countless miles of rolling country could be seen with crystal clarity. There were hills, valleys, canyons and winding streams, and here and there small clumps of trees. It took little imagination to think of the scene as a replica in miniature. The colors were too vivid, the expanse too great to be convincing.

Gulliver's husky voice broke in on the reporter's contemplation. "There's Loafer Creek," he said, pointing with a finger.

A stream that began somewhere out of sight at the base of the cliff meandered through the valleys. At several points it disappeared behind low hills and reappeared beyond.

Gulliver pointed out a dirt road in the distance. "That," he said, "is where we would o' gone if we hadn't took this route."

"I'm glad we came this way," said Whiz. "That view is worth all I endured—including your driving."

"We didn't come here for no view. We come because Lem Smiley done so, an' I hanker to know why."

"He must have had a mighty good reason," Tom said.

"And a mighty long walk," added the newspaper writer.

"There's Horsehead!" Gulliver pointed to a cluster of trees bordering Loafer Creek at a point where the brown road came close. "Yo' look sharp an' yo' can see a buildin' set back behind them there trees. That's where we're goin' an' the sooner we git started, the better."

Whiz again took the driver's seat and for the next hour it was a downhill run.

CHAPTER 12

The Ghost Town

No one knew how Horsehead got its name. No one had ever bothered to find out. The town had been one of the first settlements in that part of Texas and had grown in importance when a stage line set up stables and made it a station for changing horses. In those days there had been a post office and a general store, a number of saloons and dance halls and several other business establishments. For one brief period there had been a newspaper.

Horsehead had once boasted of a marshal and a coroner as well as a doctor of questionable ability. It had been the center of activity for cattlemen and cowboys who lived on the surrounding ranches.

But time had changed all this. Just after the War Between the States the bottom fell out of the cattle

market. It cost more to ship a steer from Horsehead than the animal was worth. Ranchers hung on as long as possible but finally threw up their hands and moved away.

Then the railroads came to the West. Many communities boomed into importance, but no tracks came near Horsehead. The iron horse displaced the stagecoach. The stagecoach line went out of business and with it the last excuse for Horsehead's existence. The settlement became a deserted village—a ghost town.

For over half a century the empty buildings were at the mercy of the sun, wind and rain. Shingles and clapboards split, curled loose and blew away; windows were blown in and doors fell from rusted hinges. Some of the buildings collapsed. Dust blew into others and lay a foot deep on some of the floors. Grass and rank weeds grew everywhere.

The Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Men were armed and sent to places in all parts of the world. And then one day a man came to Horsehead, armed only with the agile brain of an opportunist. No one knew where Steve Deal came from. He didn't talk much. But he asked a lot of questions of the contractors and engineers on the state prison project. He camped on Loafer Creek for two days while he looked around. Then he went away. Shortly afterward he became sole owner of the ghost town by paying a ridiculously small sum in taxes. When he returned, he brought his wife, a car and a trailer full of furniture. A dozen workmen followed in other cars.

Salvage operations got under way without delay. There were, in the decayed old buildings, many heavy timbers

of especially well-seasoned wood. In foundations, fireplaces and chimneys there was an almost unlimited supply of selected stone.

These were materials war had made scarce. The men who were responsible for the construction of a jail in the same county jumped at the chance to buy good wood and building stone so close at hand.

Building after building was demolished. Each day saw several heavily loaded trucks start out on the circuitous route through the mountains. As the crow flies, the new prison was quite near—perhaps a quarter of a mile, but the trucks had to travel more than fifteen miles to get there. Rugged hills, deeply cut by canyons, lay between the prison and the town of Horsehead.

In the meantime, Steve and Annie Deal made the hotel their home. They had the building weatherproofed and installed new doors and windows. They repaired enough of the rooms to serve their needs and also repaired old furniture to augment what they had brought with them. They liked the place and stayed on after the prison was finished and the last of the trucks were gone. None of these events, however, were known to the two men and one boy in Gulliver's battered jeep.

"We," announced Whiz Walton, "have arrived." He stopped the jeep, shut off the motor and turned to eye the hotel. "A study in contrasts," he observed.

Tom Quest agreed.

The spotlessly clean windows of both stories were fitted with green shades that had been drawn all the way down. The sashes and window frames gleamed with

fresh, white paint, but the rest of the big, square building had never know paint of any kind. The naked clapboards were badly warped and split. A wide veranda extended across the entire front of the hotel. This had been rebuilt between the new steps and the front door, but it sagged at both ends and there were many open slots where the floor boards had surrendered to rot.

Tom looked at the surrounding area. Here and there he saw scrap material piled as if for a bonfire. There were other piles of salvaged lumber sorted according to size. Yawning holes, some partly filled with rocks, showed where there had been a building with a cellar. Buildings without cellars had left bare rectangles. There had been, at one time, about a hundred buildings in the town of Horsehead, but now just one remained. It still wore the faded, warped, sun-bleached sign that said, "*Horsehead Hotel.*"

"It stops me cold," Whiz Walton said cryptically.

"What does?"

"That hotel. This town. Why in the name of Jumping Joe is John Hanford meeting someone in a place like this?"

Tom Quest shook his head. "I don't know," he said, "but the hotel has been fixed up and it looks as though someone's living in it."

"Someone is," said Whiz. "There's smoke coming from a chimney at the rear."

"What's more," said Gulliver, "there's automobiles around here. Look at them there tracks."

He pointed to tracks in the dirt road that ran along

one side of the hotel toward the rear. "Them there tracks," he said, "are fresh made."

The jeep squeaked as the big man climbed out.

"Did we come here to look at that stove-in hotel or to find John Hanford?" Gulliver demanded.

Tom said, "We might as well see what's cooking around here."

"Yo' foller me!" Gulliver led the way.

Gulliver didn't realize and neither did Tom or Whiz that hard eyes in one of the curtained windows had been watching from the moment the jeep had stopped.

CHAPTER 13

A Girl's Scream

THE FRONT DOOR of the hotel was securely locked. Gulliver rapped repeatedly and with increasing vigor. In one pause between knocks, Tom Quest thought he heard someone moving about inside, but the sound was not repeated. No one responded to Gulliver's robust thumping.

Gulliver studied the oaken panel for a moment. Then he turned to Tom and said, "It's a first-rate door, but I've shoved my fist through stronger ones. Yo' say so, Tom, an' I'll see what I can do."

"Hold it!" Tom said. "Don't smash it, Gulliver. Let's try the back door."

Gulliver looked somewhat disappointed. "If yo' say so, Tom," he grumbled, "but the most direct line from here to the inside o' this place is through that door."

He went down the steps, two at a time, and strode to-

ward the rear with Tom and Whiz at his heels. He drew up at the door and looked at it scornfully. "That one," he observed, "I could smash easy. I'll rap light the *first* time an' someone better answer."

Gulliver made his right hand into a fist. He was about to knock when Tom Quest said, "Wait a minute!"

"For what?"

"Look over there."

Across the rear of the hotel a slanting roof dropped from just below the second-story windows. The outer edge, supported on posts, came to within eight feet from the ground. The front and sides were open.

No grass grew behind the hotel. The ground was hard-packed clay extending from the building to the bank of Loafer Creek a hundred feet away.

But it was neither the lean-to nor the clay that had caught Tom Quest's interest. It was a row of cars beneath the sloping roof. There were seven cars—all of them old and crusted with dirt.

"Let's look them over," Tom said.

Whiz Walton agreed. He and Tom moved to the shed, but Gulliver stayed where he was and scowled.

"I'm fed up with dillydally an' delay," he muttered. "I aim to find John Hanford." His big fist banged twice on the door.

"These cars," observed Whiz Walton, "look like fugitives from the scrap heap."

Tom nodded. "But look," he said. "Every one of them has a new license plate."

"And new tires." The reporter's observation was quite

accurate. Every wheel of every car was equipped with tires that didn't show the slightest sign of wear.

Further investigation was suspended when Gulliver called, "Yo' better git over here. Someone's unlockin' the door."

Tom and Whiz Walton hurried to the big man's side.

The door was opened by a tall, rawboned woman with a gaunt face and a blotchy complexion. Her thick black hair was drawn back tightly and coiled in a hard knob. She looked straight at Gulliver without flinching while she wiped her hands on a dish towel. "I saw you through the window," she said in a reedy voice. "Why're you coyotin' around? What d'you want?"

"We warn't coyotin' around," argued Gulliver. "We rapped on the front door an'—"

"I heard you. You hammered fit to smash the door down."

"Why didn't yo' answer?"

"I figured you'd go away. I don't like company. Besides, I was doin' my dishes."

Tom Quest looked past the sharp-eyed woman into a large kitchen. Dirty dishes were stacked on the sink and large cooking utensils rested on the stove, but in spite of these, the room had a generally neat appearance. The stove gleamed with fresh polish. The cupboards on the walls were freshly painted and the floor had a well-scrubbed look. The room seemed to be the workshop of one who abhorred dirt and disorder.

Whiz Walton was speaking. "You'll have to pardon

us," he said smoothly, "but your sign says this is a hotel. We—"

"It's no hotel," snapped the woman. "It's my home an' I don't take no boarders."

"We don't want to board," said Tom. "We came here to meet a man named John Hanford."

All expression left the woman's face. Her speech was measured.

"John Hanford, eh? What makes you think he's here?"

"We were given to understand that he left Bliss to come here a couple of weeks ago. His stepdaughter was with him."

"Um-hum," the woman said slowly. "That's right."

"Then you saw him! Is he here now?" asked Tom eagerly.

"You friends of his?"

"Yes."

"We sure are," added Gulliver. "Where's he at?"

Ignoring Gulliver, the woman spoke directly to Tom. "They've gone," she said.

"Gone?"

"Where did they go?" demanded Whiz Walton. "How long ago did they leave?"

"You'd better talk to my husband." Turning from the door, the woman raised a raucous voice and shouted, "Deal!"

A man replied from some remote part of the hotel. "What d'ya want, Annie? I'm busy."

"Busy or not, you'd better come here. It's about John Hanford."

"Be right there."

The woman's manner changed for the better. She was almost cordial. "Why didn't you come right out an' say why you were here?" she asked. "How was I to know you were lookin' for John Hanford?" She went right on speaking without pausing for a reply. "Y'see we're here all alone an' we have to be careful. With a jail full of criminals just beyond the hill, there's always the chance that some escaped convicts will come here an' make trouble."

And then it happened. A girl's scream cut the air like a knife. It wasn't a completed scream. It stopped abruptly as if the screamer had been choked or gagged. Tom Quest tensed every muscle. He was ready to leap into action—to respond to what sounded like a desperate appeal for help. The scream hadn't jarred Annie Deal as it had the others. She must have heard it many times before. She sighed heavily and murmured, "Oh, dear me. The poor girl." She smiled apologetically and said, "Don't let that get you. We have it all the time."

"Wha—what is it?" asked Tom. "It sounded like a girl."

Annie nodded slowly. "My daughter," she said. "Poor thing."

"What's the matter with her?"

Annie touched the side of her head significantly. "It's her head," she said. "She ain't right."

"Oh," Tom said sympathetically. "That's a shame."

"Deal an' I came here to earn an honest dollar by sellin' salvage to the contractors that were buildin' the

new jail. When that job was done, we figured it might help our girl to be here, away from everythin', so we fixed this place up an' brought her here. Up to that time we'd been keepin' her in an institution."

"Has it helped her to be here?" asked Whiz.

"Well, that's hard to say. Sometimes she's pretty good, but other times she gets the notion that she's bein' held by strangers." Annie wiped the corners of her eyes with one end of the dish towel. "Don't even know her own parents," she sniffled. "She's always upset by strangers."

"Gosh," muttered Gulliver, "if I'd o' knowed that I wouldn't o' rapped so hard."

Steve Deal crossed the kitchen and stood beside his wife. He had a slightly harassed look in his tanned face and his iron-gray hair was rumpled. He wore sleeve garters, but no collar, on his striped shirt. His vest hung open. "What d'you want?" he demanded curtly.

"They're lookin' for John Hanford an' his daughter," Annie explained. "I told 'em that Hanford an' the girl had left."

Deal said, "Yeah, they've left. Does that answer your question?"

"Not exactly," Tom said.

Annie broke in. "I told 'em there was no one here but you an' me an' our daughter."

Deal cast a sharp glance at the woman.

"I had to tell 'em about the poor girl and how her head ain't right," Annie continued. "They heard her scream. I told 'em how we brought her from the institution an' settled here where we could keep her with us."

Tom Quest had the feeling that the gaunt woman went into uncalled-for detail. Was she trying to cue her husband to forestall a contradictory story? Tom couldn't put his finger on it, but there was something about her manner that didn't ring true. He glanced at Whiz Walton.

The keen reporter wore a slight frown as if he, too, had caught a false note. But the frown smoothed out quickly. Whiz smiled pleasantly at the man called Deal and said, "I guess we made your wife a little suspicious by looking around here. We were interested in the cars. Do you own all of them?"

"Yeah," replied Deal. "I had quite a number of men workin' here when we tore down the buildings. Some of 'em got drafted an' wanted to get rid of their cars. I bought 'em, figurin' to take 'em somewhere an' sell at a profit. So far, I haven't had the time." It was a reasonable explanation, smoothly given, and it sounded convincing, but Tom caught a slight discrepancy.

Gulliver wasn't interested in cars or screaming women. He had just one thought in mind. "Where," he rasped, "is Hanford at?"

Annie said, "I thought you'd better tell them about Hanford, Steve. That's why I called you."

Steve eyed Gulliver, then Whiz, and last of all, Tom Quest. "Who's lookin' for him? Who are you?"

Tom introduced himself, then Whiz and Gulliver.

"Oh-h," Deal said. "So you're Gulliver."

Gulliver grunted.

"Didn't Hanford show up at your ranch?"

"If he'd come there, d'ya think we'd be whittle-whangin' around here lookin' for him?"

"How long is it since you've been at your ranch?"

"I was there yesterday an' I didn't see nothin' o' John Hanford!"

Deal looked concerned. "That's odd," he said. "He should have been there a long time ago. He came here lookin' for someone. There was a mistake somewhere, but by the time he found it out, the fellow from Bliss who drove over with 'em had started back . . ."

"That'd be Lem Smiley," put in Gulliver.

"I wouldn't know," said Deal. "At any rate, we put Hanford an' his daughter up for the night. The next day he got some gas off me an' set out for your ranch. That's all I know about him."

"He didn't git there."

Deal shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know what happened to him."

"He acted mighty nervous," Annie said. "Acted like he had a lot of worry on his mind. His daughter seemed worried, too."

"Sorry I can't give you any more information."

Gulliver looked at Tom. "Our luck is runnin' muddy," he said. "I reckon we better pile back to my place an' see if he's showed up. Don't yo' think so, Tom?"

Tom hesitated. He couldn't believe it. It wasn't like Gulliver to accept Deal's story without argument.

"There's nothin' much else we can do."

"Whatever you say, Gulliver." Tom thanked the couple in the doorway for the information. "Sorry we bothered you," he added.

"That's all right," said Deal. "No bother at all. By the way, you came in from the south, didn't you?"

Gulliver said, "Uh-huh."

"That road hasn't been used for a long time. I thought it had been blocked by a rock, or a landslide, or somethin'."

"It was," replied Gulliver, "but it ain't now." He turned abruptly and said, "Let's git gittin'."

CHAPTER 14

Lem Smiley's Campground

Tom Quest did the driving. It was nearly sunset when he turned the jeep and, at Gulliver's suggestion, set out along the regular route to Bliss—the one Lem Smiley had used when he rode with John Hanford. It ran parallel to Loafer Creek and would do so for several miles. Then, according to the map, it would continue straight while the stream meandered to the side.

The road was good and bordered by trees, but Tom didn't notice. His mood was introspective. Until now he hadn't realized how much he had been counting on the meeting with John Hanford. He hadn't realized how strongly a secret chamber of his mind had been clinging to the absurd hope that his father might be alive. Common sense had told him that at best the engineer might

be able to add to the sketchy details of the attack that had wiped out the expedition. But in spite of this, the tiny spark of hope had burned.

From the time he had received Gulliver's letter and the photographs, his every thought had been focused on his quest for news of his father. And now the one man in the world who might furnish some clue to the fate of the lost explorer was gone.

Horsehead was in back of him and John Hanford seemed as far away as ever. What had happened to him and his stepdaughter? They had, according to Deal's story, reached the hotel about two weeks ago and had left the following day for Gulliver's ranch. There might have been some difficulty in locating the place. The engineer might have been delayed a day—possibly two days—but hardly any longer. Gulliver was well known in the vicinity beyond Bliss. Almost anyone could have told John Hanford how to reach his home. Where had Hanford gone and what had become of Lem Smiley?

"Now hold 'er slow," said Gulliver from the seat at Tom Quest's side as they lost sight of the rickety hotel. "We got to watch both sides o' this here road."

"What for?" asked Tom.

"Lem Smiley camped somewheres along here within earshot o' the Deal place, an' I aim to find that camp site."

"Then we're not going to your ranch?"

"For what?"

"But you told Mr. and Mrs. Deal—"

"Never yo' mind what I told 'em. If they think we're

goin' to go knockin' around like a blind dog in a meat shop, they just better think agin."

"Then you don't believe their story?"

"That yarn? Humph! Not on yo' life! That critter named Deal looked meaner'n a centipede with chilblains. I wouldn't believe anythin' he said. If Hanford was goin' to my ranch, he'd have been there before I left to meet yo' in Bliss."

"That's what I thought."

"I aim to camp where Smiley camped an' see if we can hear what he heard."

"Mrs. Deal explained the woman's cries—"

"Maybe so, but they didn't give no accountin' for the rumblin' in the ground."

"Maybe we should have asked about it."

"That wouldn't o' done no good, Tom. If it was somethin' we warn't supposed to know about, the Deals would have churned up a triple-twisted, yard-wide lie."

Tom grinned. "Golly," he said, "I was afraid you'd given up."

"On account of I didn't argue with them Deals? Not on yo' life! I didn't say much because I didn't want to git frothy. I figured I'd better keep a checkrein on my disposition."

Whiz Walton spoke from the rear seat. "I didn't know you had it in you," he said.

Gulliver ignored the comment. "I just kept calm," he went on, "figurin' to throw them Deals off guard. They think we pulled stakes but, by thunder, we ain't leavin' this vicinity till we know a few things."

The jeep had been creeping along through the dusk. Suddenly Tom interrupted. "Sit tight!" he cried and jammed on his brakes.

All four wheels froze. The heavy tires scuffed dust.

Tom backed for fifty feet, then stopped and pointed to a low damp spot in the road where a man's footprints were plainly visible in the ditch.

"Let's find out where they go," said Whiz.

Gulliver nodded.

Tom turned off the road and followed the tracks through a fairly large stand of cottonwoods to the bank of Loafer Creek. He pointed to a blackened spot—the stale remains of a campfire. The spot was only a few hundred yards from the Horsehead Hotel.

Gulliver scrambled over the side of the car with the eagerness of a schoolboy.

"Here's where I cut sign," he grunted. "I aim to git some true facts."

He first examined the ashes where the fire had been. He paid particular attention to a small hole about an inch in diameter, in the ground near the ashes, and a few cottonwood chips that lay around the hole. He inspected the grass and weeds that had been broken in the surrounding vicinity. The investigation moved to fresh breaks on the dead branches of a fallen tree and from there to the muddy bank of Loafer Creek.

Tom and Whiz followed every move with interest. Gulliver finally turned and issued a matter-of-fact statement.

"One man camped here for one night. It was more'n one week ago an' not more'n three. I judge he didn't cook more'n one meal, but I could be off on that. He might o' had two meals while he was here but not a darn smidge more'n two."

"How," demanded the reporter, "do you know all this?"

"What I told yo' so far is easy to see. Right where yo're standin' are the tracks that was made by the critter when he come here to the crick for water. If he was here for more'n one night, he would've used more water an' firewood. A man that wants a first-rate fire cuts solid hunks o' wood with his ax. I judge by that he did mighty little cookin'."

"Maybe he didn't have an ax," suggested Whiz.

"How do yo' think them cottonwood chips got by the fire?" demanded Gulliver. "They warn't chewed by no beaver."

"Then he did cut wood with an ax?"

"He cut a hunk o' *green* wood—a low branch with a fork in 'er from the tree right over yonder. He used the ax to put a point on it so's he could stick it in the ground to hold his cookin' gear."

Whiz nodded and said, "Oh."

Gulliver went on in a resigned tone. "I expect I gotta explain everythin'. Anyone but a tenderfoot can see the shape this here grass is in. If it'd been broken down less than a week ago it'd be greener'n this an' if it'd been broken more'n three weeks ago—"

"It would be drier," finished Whiz. "Is that it?"

Gulliver grunted and strode to the jeep. "Gimme a hand," he said.

"Do you think this is where Lem Smiley stayed?" asked Tom.

"Sure is." Gulliver climbed into the jeep and began tossing out the things he deemed essential. Blanket rolls, an ax, pots and pans and wooden boxes were handed out to Whiz and Tom who placed them on the ground. Then Gulliver jumped out.

Whiz eyed the array and said sarcastically, "Is that *all?*"

"No. There's one more chest, but I don't trust no one but myself to handle 'er." Gulliver reached into the jeep and grasped the handles of a heavy ironbound chest that showed signs of age and wear. It was heavy enough to make the big man grunt when he lifted it from the car and placed it gently on the ground.

Such gentle handling aroused Whiz Walton's curiosity.

"What is it?" he asked Tom.

"An old-fashioned medicine chest," Tom replied. "It's the kind that used to be taken along by sailing vessels."

"Now," said Gulliver, "we'll set up the camp an' see if we can hear them noises that Lem Smiley heard. A caterwaulin' woman an' a rumblin' in the ground."

CHAPTER 15

On the Banks of Loafer Creek

GULLIVER judged that there would be no rain that night and therefore no need of shelter. He spread a tarpaulin on the ground and tossed a couple of heavy blanket rolls on top of it.

"Open 'em up," he told Whiz Walton. "Yo'll find some work shirts an' dungarees inside the blankets. They'll be more fittin' for what's ahead than that suit yo're wearin'."

The reporter looked at his custom-made suit of soft, gray flannel. It had suffered considerably since he'd left the train at Bliss. It was a mass of wrinkles. There were huge smears of grease and oil from the jeep, and an overall powdering of reddish dust.

"Look at this suit," he said ruefully. "It was almost new. Set me back a hundred and fifty bucks."

Gulliver grinned at the reporter's appearance. "Got more wrinkles than a burned shoe," he observed. "I fetched along some clothes Tom wears when he visits my ranch. I reckon they'll be a little loose on yo', but they'll stand up better'n dude clothes."

"Which of the blanket rolls should I open?" Whiz inquired.

Tom said, "It doesn't matter. You take one and I'll take the other. They've both got to be opened."

"While yo're doin' that," said Gulliver, "I'll break out the cookin' tools an' lay out the chuck."

The blanket rolls had been tightly strapped; Gulliver had seen to that. Whiz had to sit astride the bundle and tug with all his strength to loosen the buckle.

It was amazing how much had been packed inside a roll three feet in length and less than fourteen inches in diameter. When the blanket was unrolled, the reporter saw one more example of big Gulliver's efficiency. Somehow it always surprised Whiz Walton to find signs of neatness in a man who looked like Gulliver.

There were several pairs of dungarees and four blue denim shirts. The clothing was not new, but it was clean. There was underwear as well as several pairs of woolen socks. There were also shoes—two pairs of rugged Army shoes that had been built for service. Whiz found neckerchiefs and gloves, a heavy woolen sweater, and a woolen shirt of red plaid generally referred to as a lumberjack. Beneath the clothing, much to his surprise, Whiz Walton found four heavy Turkish towels.

He was interested in the manner in which the blanket roll had been prepared. The blanket had been spread flat, the things to be packed laid carefully in a three-foot strip from one end to the other. There the sides had been folded over, and the whole thing rolled tightly and fastened with a strap at each end.

Whiz noticed that the other blanket roll, though it contained less clothing, was made up of two blankets instead of one.

"This one," said Tom, "belongs to Gulliver."

Gulliver looked up. "Yo' can help yo'self to clothes from either one," he said, "but I reckon yo'll find my stuff fits with a little too much room to spare."

Whiz grinned and said, "Yeah, I *reckon* so." He turned to Tom. "Do you mind if I borrow some dungarees and a shirt?"

"I should say not," said Tom heartily. "Help yourself. Whenever we go on a trip, Gulliver brings about four times as much clothing as I need. You better take a pair of those heavy shoes, too."

"An' while yo're at it," added Gulliver, "yo' might as well go whole hog an' git rid o' that dude hat yo' been wearin'. Yo'll find a couple o' Stetsons somewheres in the jeep."

Whiz said, "Thanks."

He turned from the blankets when he saw Gulliver opening the medicine chest. Inside there were innumerable bottles, vials and jars, each bearing a number instead of a label. It was a system devised to reduce to fundamental simplicity the treatment of ailments and accidents at sea.

There had originally been a pamphlet of instructions, but this had been lost long ago. Gulliver relied upon his memory and trial-and-error method to make use of the assorted pills, powders, liquids and unguents.

From the depths of the chest he brought a cake of yellow soap. He placed it on the ground saying, "Yo'll maybe want to scrub up some before we eat."

He turned back to the chest.

"I got blame near everythin' in here," he said proudly. He studied the jars. "One o' these has some stuff in it that's good for sunburn an' insect stings. It'd likely ease off that face."

Whiz felt of his sunburned face. It hurt.

"Salve would help," he admitted.

Gulliver held two jars. "Only trouble is," he muttered, "I forgit if it's one-seven or seven-one. I know one o' these is good for what you got."

"What's the other?"

"It's stuff I use on steers. Yo' put it on with a stick an' it eats right into the hide. It's a chemical brand an' a lot easier to use than a brandin' iron."

"My face doesn't bother me a bit," Whiz said quickly. "It feels fine."

Gulliver had the lid off one jar. "I can try a little smidge on yo' chin an' see if it starts smokin'," he suggested.

"No!" shouted Whiz emphatically.

Gulliver looked hurt. "Suit yo'self," he said, as he put one-seven and seven-one back in stock. "If yo'd sooner go on sufferin' with sunburn, it's all right with me."

He found numbers one through six inclusive and placed them near the food.

"Now what are you going to do?" demanded Whiz.

"I'm goin' ahead with gittin' supper. What'd yo' think I was doin'? This is the stuff I use. Salt an' pepper, an' seasonin'."

Tom Quest fed more wood to the fire he had started in a semicircle of flat stones piled up to form a fireplace.

"It'll take a few minutes for that to burn down," he said. "In the meantime, I'm going to have a swim."

"That sounds good to me," agreed Whiz Walton, unbuckling the cartridge belt and pulling off his coat. "How about you, Gulliver?"

"Yo' go ahead. I'll git the eatin' fixed up."

He scooped several handfuls of frijoles into each of two empty lard cans. "We'll have *freeholes*."

"Beans?" asked Whiz.

Gulliver gave the reporter a slow wink. "The way I fix 'em," he said, "they'll be like nothin' yo' ever et."

The water in Loafer Creek was clear and cold. It was invigorating after the long hours of hot sun and dust. Tom swam like a dolphin. His muscles rippled smoothly as his tanned body cut through the water in a racing crawl. He swam against the three-mile current, then turned on his back and floated downstream to the starting point. Whiz had a more leisurely dip. He was a fair swimmer, but no match for Tom Quest.

It was a short swim, but it did them good. They dried themselves briskly, then climbed into clean dungarees and blue shirts. Tom's clothes were a trifle large around

the shoulders and a little tight at the waist, but Whiz felt more comfortable in them than in his flannel suit.

Gulliver had done all right. Bacon—lots of it—sizzled in a frying pan. The coffee had come to a boil and the Mexican beans were ready to eat. The blended aroma put a razor edge on appetites that were already sharp.

Tin cups and plates, canned milk, sugar and other things that might be needed were set up in readiness.

Gulliver beamed proudly.

"There she is," he said, pointing to the spread. "Eat 'er, or I'll throw 'er out."

He heaped his dish with beans from one of the lard tins. Tom loaded his plate from the other.

Whiz looked into both tins. Both held beans and looked identical. "What's the difference?" he asked.

"Tom can't eat seasonin'," Gulliver explained briefly. "Yo' can take yo' choice."

Whiz generally used condiments. He liked horseradish, and sauces, and wondered why Tom was so finicky.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Is Tom allergic?"

Gulliver wasn't sure of the word, but it didn't matter. He couldn't have answered, anyway. His mouth was too full. He nodded and let it go at that. The expression of ecstasy on his battered face was enough for Whiz Walton. He loaded his plate with the frijoles Gulliver had spiced.

"I'm starved," he said, forking up a mouthful.

It was like white-hot lava. The reporter felt his tonsils shrivel from the touch of something searing; from lips to esophagus he felt like a blast furnace; tears sprang into

his eyes and rolled down his sunburned cheeks. It was as if someone had filled his mouth with molten metal. He thought of the chemical that was used in place of a branding iron and wondered if, by some mishap, he'd gotten a concentrated dose of the stuff instead of frijole beans. He turned away, emptied his mouth on the ground, then looked at Gulliver. He gasped for breath and there was an unspoken plea in his streaming eyes.

Chewing placidly, Gulliver passed a mug of water without comment.

Whiz gulped until the mug was empty. Then he found a weak, thin voice that had little resemblance to his own. "Oh," he breathed. "Oh, my!"

Gulliver swallowed with a gulp and pointed at the beans with his fork. "That there," he boasted, "is food that's got authority."

"It's distillate of T.N.T.," gasped Whiz.

"It's seasonin' that does it," Gulliver said smugly. "I got a friend that sends me pepper powder all the way from Mexico City."

Whiz scraped his plate onto Gulliver's which was nearly empty, then refilled it from the source of supply that Tom had used.

"Why didn't you warn me?" he asked Tom.

Tom grinned. "I wanted you to appreciate Gulliver," he replied. "Did you ever see anything like him?"

Whiz shook his head and said fervently, "No. I never did!"

Whiz quickly recovered from his encounter with Gulliver's highly spiced food and ate a hearty meal. The food

was plain, but after the day out of doors, it tasted better than anything the reporter had known in many years. He emptied his plate three times and topped the meal with several cups of perfect coffee.

Gulliver was proud of his cooking. He was pleased at the way Tom and Whiz ate. He explained that the store bread was something unusual. For subsequent meals he would prepare biscuits of sourdough or bake some "twist" on sticks.

When the dishes had been washed and put away, the three sat on blankets with their backs propped against trees and their feet stretched toward the small fire.

All three had felt from the time they had left the Horsehead Hotel that a discussion of events was indicated —that plans would have to be made—decisions arrived at.

Gulliver was thinking, a scowl on his battered face. Tom's eyes had a faraway look and Whiz Walton sat with his eyes closed and the bridge of his nose held lightly between a thumb and index finger.

Darkness gathered. The moon came into view. The campfire crackled and Loafer Creek supplied a gurgling obbligato to the solos of the katydids.

CHAPTER 16

Rumbling in the Earth

WHIZ WALTON was the first to speak.

He said, "Gulliver—"

"Huh?"

"You think this is where Lem Smiley camped?"

"I know it is an', what's more, there's some connection between Hanford an' Lem Smiley."

"You don't think Hanford went to your ranch?"

"That story Deal told is a lot o' hogwash."

"Why do you say that?"

"Hanford didn't know how to get to my place an' Steve Deal couldn't tell him. He'd have to stop an' ask the way."

"Maybe he did."

"He'd pass Limpy Martin's place first of all. He'd ask there, an' he didn't or Limpy would o' told us."

The reporter nodded approvingly. "That," he said, "makes sense."

"It makes a blame sight more sense than what Lem Smiley said to Martin."

"You mean about the rumbling in the earth?"

"That an' the yowlin' woman. If Lem camped here, he couldn't o' heard Deal's daughter. That hotel's a good piece away from here."

"But, Gulliver, it can't be more than half a mile or so—and sounds carry at night. Or maybe Lem was doing some scouting. Things may have looked a bit fishy to him, too."

Gulliver frowned and hoed his chin with a thumbnail. After a pause he said, "I reckon yo're right, Whiz. Smiley might o' camped here, then gone coyote-footin' back to Horsehead. Maybe that's how he come to hear the gal."

"He must have had some reason for going there."

"Yeah. That's what's got me stopped. Doggone it, Whiz, where at is Hanford? An' Lem Smiley?"

Whiz said, "There's a false note in the way Steve Deal and his wife talked. I can't put my finger on it. Their story sounded straight enough—"

"Wait!" Tom broke in suddenly.

It was the first time he had entered the conversation. Until that instant he had been completely lost in thought.

Gulliver said, "Huh?"

Whiz Walton said, "What is it, Tom?"

Tom's face was alive. His voice was eager. "I know what's wrong about the Deals," he said. "Something struck me wrong while we were talking to them, but it took until just now to get it straight. Did you notice the windows of the hotel?"

Gulliver and Whiz Walton nodded in unison.

"They were new," said Whiz.

"Not only that," said Tom, "they were as clean as a hound's tooth. And did you notice how Mrs. Deal looked?"

Gulliver grunted and said, "She looked like a horse."

"She wasn't pretty, Gulliver, but her hair was neat and her dress was clean and the kitchen was orderly and clean, too. Now, look—" Tom hunched forward. "I've been putting myself in Annie Deal's place."

Gulliver said, "That sounds lilke some o' yo' dad's figurin'."

The reporter muttered, "Make believe you're the dog—Go on, Tom. You're Annie Deal."

Tom spoke rapidly.

"I'm fussy about housekeeping. I can't stand dirty windows and floors. I like the cupboards neat and tidy and the stove polished. As soon as a meal is over, I wash the dishes and put them away."

"She was washing dishes," put in the newshound, "when we got there."

Tom Quest went on. "I wouldn't let dishes pile up in the sink. I'd wash them after breakfast and after dinner and again after supper. Isn't that right?"

The others nodded.

"I'm cooking and dishwashing for just three people—my husband, my daughter and myself. We were told there was no one else in the hotel. Remember?"

Nods.

"That means there would be three coffee cups after a meal. If I *do* let the breakfast dishes wait and use three fresh cups at noon, there'd only be six dirty cups. Then if I let all the dishes stay dirty and use three more cups for supper—there's nine dirty cups at the most."

"What," demanded Gulliver, "are yo' gittin' at?"

"Maybe you didn't notice, but there were fifteen dirty cups stacked up on Annie Deal's sink. And there were cooking utensils to be washed. Great big ones, lots bigger than you'd use to cook a meal for just three people, and she didn't use them because she had to. There were a number of small pots and pans on the shelf."

"She lied to us," said Gulliver explosively. "She lied like a half-breed when she said there was only three people in that there house. That's what yo're gittin' at, ain't it, Tom?"

"Yes."

"Fifteen cups," put in Whiz Walton, "mean fifteen people."

"That," said Tom, "accounts for all the cars we saw."

"Then yo' think, Tom, that Steve Deal don't own all o' them cars?"

"The cars," said Tom, "had this year's license plates."

Whiz said, "I noticed that. Deal said he had bought

them from the men who had helped him get the materials to finish the new jail."

"The jail was finished a couple of years ago. If Deal told the truth, those cars have been lying around there for at least two years."

The keen reporter grasped the significance of Tom's statement. "Steve Deal," he said, "would have had no reason to license all those cars unless he intended to use them. Tom, I think you've got something!"

Gulliver smacked one fist down on the palm of his other hand. It sounded like the crack of a pistol.

"That settles it," he said. "Deal an' his wife are a couple o' triple-twisted, side-windin' liars. Fifteen people in that there hotel! Well, by thunder, that settles it! We're goin' back there tomorrow an' ask that horse-faced woman an' her husband a few questions!"

The fire had died down to a bed of glowing coals. Tom lay flat on his back with his hands beneath his head and his eyes wide open. Half of his blanket lay beneath him on a ground cloth; the other half was folded over.

The stars seemed bright and close to the ground. Tom had the impression that they were descending, sinking like a slow curtain and moving in on all sides. Then he felt as if he had been lifted into the deep blue void. His eyes closed, but the images of stars remained. Then, one by one, the dots of light were blinking out.

Suddenly Tom roused. He sat up and rubbed his eyes. He had nearly fallen asleep in spite of his determination

to listen for unusual sounds in the night—such as a rumbling in the earth.

Gulliver was snoring heavily. Whiz Walton's deep, slow breathing told that he, too, was asleep.

The night was filled with sounds and Tom identified each one. The ripple of the creek, the chirp of crickets and the croak of frogs. He heard the brush of night birds' wings and the infrequent, distant call of prowling nocturnal animals. Tom isolated every sound—but there was nothing unfamiliar.

He glanced toward Loafer Creek. A little while ago the reflected moonlight had had a silvery brilliance, but now it seemed tarnished. He went barefoot to the bank and found the water sluggish and thick instead of clear and sparkling.

An electric torch from the jeep provided better light. Mud seemed to have been stirred into the stream. Though the water was but six inches deep near shore, it was so roiled that Tom Quest could not see the bottom.

The changed condition of the creek was food for thought after Tom had returned to his blanket and stretched out on his side.

And then he heard it!

His ear, pressed close to the ground, picked up a soft vibration that grew stronger. When Tom raised his head the vibration stopped. His ear to the ground, again, he heard a dull rumble that increased in volume for a few seconds then faded into silence.

Tom was on his feet. He grabbed Gulliver by the shoulder and shook hard.

"Gulliver," he said. "Wake up!"

The big man blinked and groaned.

"Wake up, I tell you! I've heard the rumbling in the earth!"

And there was another sound in the night, but it was too far away, too soft for Tom to hear. It was the sound of a girl sobbing in a locked room at the Horsehead Hotel.

CHAPTER 17

Death from the Jungle

TOM QUEST climbed out of his blanket at sunrise while the others were still sleeping. He did a few simple exercises, learned from the school athletic coach, to limber muscles that were stiff and lame from sleeping on hard ground. He pulled on his socks and shoes and went to examine the creek by daylight.

It seemed even muddier than it had been during the night. The water was coffee-colored and unfit for bathing or drinking.

Tom filled several pails with the murky fluid and left it to settle. Then he filled the coffeepot from Gulliver's precious supply of clean water, brought specifically for

use in the jeep's radiator. He measured out the right amount of coffee, set the pot on rocks and built up the fire.

When the fire was right, Tom opened the larder and laid a dozen big slices of bacon in the frying pan. Soon it started sizzling. The sound and an accompanying fragrance nudged Gulliver's senses.

The big man blinked and rubbed his eyes. He yawned, stretched his arms, then climbed to his feet. He prodded Whiz Walton with his toe and said, "Git up!"

Without opening his eyes, Whiz reached out and waved his hand, groping for the telephone that generally awakened him. Gulliver gripped the hand and pulled the reporter to his feet.

Whiz, like the others, had been up for two hours during the night to listen to the mysterious rumble that came and went at intervals. The rumbling, like the mystery of the mud in Loafer Creek, had been worn thin by discussion.

The discussion began all over again at breakfast.

"What would make it muddy like that?" demanded Whiz Walton.

"Mud," replied Gulliver.

"But where did it come from?"

Gulliver shrugged his heavy shoulders. "I dunno."

Tom said, "It's worse this morning than it was last night."

"I heard rumbles in my dreams," complained the newshawk. "Has anyone a theory about it?"

Gulliver shook his head. "Not me," he said.

"It seemed to fade in and out."

"It couldn't be something like an earthquake, could it?"

"No, Tom. Nothing like that. It was regular." The reporter helped himself to more bacon. "The noise came and went at regular intervals."

"Do you suppose there's any connection between the rumbling and the muddy water?"

"I've wondered."

"Or between the rumbling and the disappearance of Hanford and his daughter—and Lem Smiley?"

"We," put in Gulliver, "got an awful lot to learn. The sooner we git gittin', the sooner we'll git some answers."

He took the reporter's tin plate.

"Pick up yo' bacon if yo' aim to eat it," he said. "We gotta wash up the plates."

"The plate is cleaner right now than it will be if you try to wash it in that creek."

Tom said, "I left some water to settle. I'll see if we can pour off enough to wash up."

He went to the bank of the creek, but before he could inspect the pails he'd left there, something upstream caught his eye.

A distant object floated on the muddy water. As he watched, the object moved. He saw an arm reach out of the water and go down.

"Hey," he shouted. "Come here!"

Whiz and Gulliver came on the run.

"Look at that," Tom pointed.

"A man!" exclaimed Whiz.

"That water ain't fit for swimmin'," Gulliver observed.

While they watched, the man was carried toward them by the current. He wasn't exactly swimming. Neither was he floating. He seemed to be struggling to keep his head up. At one point, where the current carried him close to the low bank, he clutched at projecting roots and tried to pull himself to dry ground. The current was stronger than the man. It broke his grip, tore him away from the bank and swept him downstream toward the three who watched.

"He's in trouble!" cried Tom. He pulled off his shoes and hit the water.

It was a simple matter for Tom to bring the struggling man to shore. Gulliver hauled him from the water and stretched him on the ground.

The man's feet were bare. He wore a thin shirt that was unbuttoned halfway down, and dungarees. He was smeared from head to foot with mud. His face, beneath the mud, was distorted in anguish.

"Great day," exclaimed Gulliver. "It's Lem Smiley."

Lem groaned in mortal agony. Tom wiped his face with a clean cloth while Gulliver poured black coffee.

"Here, Lem," he said, "drink this."

Lem rolled his eyes and gasped.

"How about artificial respiration?" suggested Whiz.

Tom shook his head. "He wasn't drowning," he said.

Gulliver spoke again. "Where at are yo' hurt, Lem? What's wrong with yo'?"

Moans and gasps were the only response.

Lem's face seemed puffed and swollen. His breathing became spasmodic and he writhed in pain.

Tom placed a hand on his face. It was hot and feverish.

Lem's puffed lips moved. He tried to speak. The sound was inaudible. Tom leaned close.

"Say it again," he pleaded.

This time he caught the word that Smiley breathed. It was "Hanford."

"What about Hanford? Did you see him?"

"Ho-hotel," gasped the stricken man. "The g-girl—g-get her out."

An awful tenseness seemed to freeze Lem Smiley's face. His eyes closed and his whole body became rigid. He began to tremble in some kind of seizure that was horrible to watch. His puffed lips fell apart and each breath gurgled in his throat. The trembling stopped and he was limp and motionless. He opened his eyes, which had a glazed appearance, then closed them slowly as the color drained from his flushed face.

Gulliver raised Lem's left hand from the ground and felt for the pulse in the wrist.

Tom emptied a tin coffee cup and polished the bottom on Whiz Walton's shirt. He held the shining metal to Lem's mouth and nostrils. It remained bright and unfogged.

"He—he isn't breathing," Tom said softly.

Gulliver lowered the left arm to the ground and rose to his feet.

"We sure *have* got a lot to learn," he muttered. "On top of everythin' else, we gotta learn what killed Lem Smiley."

The strange death affected each of the three in a different way.

Tom Quest was stunned. It was hard for him to believe that life had gone from the man who lay on the ground. He thought of Lem's old car, waiting in Limpy Martin's barn. Lem would never use that car again. Lem's feet were bare. Where were his shoes and socks? Did Lem have another pair at home? Something suitable for burial? Strange thoughts ran through Tom's brain. Little unimportant details—things that were peculiarly personal.

Whiz Walton's training filled his mind with questions that began with "W's." Where? When? Who? Why? The reporter wanted cold facts.

And Gulliver. The big man stood over Lem's body with his huge hands made into fists. His small eyes burned with rage. Just one thought struck a chord in Gulliver's brain. Someone had killed Lem Smiley. Whoever it was, he'd have to pay.

Whiz Walton broke the silence. "We've got to find out what killed him," he said.

"What do you think it could have been?" asked Tom.

"Looked to me like some sort of poison," the reporter replied. "I suppose we'll have to take him to the nearest town and let the coroner have a look."

With cool deliberation, Whiz inspected the dead man's trouser pockets. "Might find something in the way of a lead," he muttered. But there was nothing. The pockets were empty.

Lem's ribs showed plainly through the clinging wet shirt. The shirt outlined something other than ribs. Whiz reached beneath it and drew out a piece of folded paper

—part of a newspaper—and tossed it aside on the grass.

"There's something else," he muttered as he reached in a second time. "I felt it."

It was a curious bit of wood six inches long and an eighth of an inch in diameter. One end was wrapped with wool cloth and the other end was pointed. The pointed end was darkly stained.

Gulliver's eyes went wide when he saw the dart. He reached out and took it from the reporter's hand. "Gimme that," he said. "Yo' just scratch the end o' yo' finger with that point an' yo'll die the same as Smiley did."

"What do you mean?" demanded Whiz.

"This black stuff is the poison them savages down in the jungle country use."

"Curare!"

"That's it," said Tom Quest, remembering things that Gulliver had told him. "The savages shoot those darts from blowguns."

Whiz recalled the picture Tom had showed him on the train . . . the picture of John Hanford and the half-naked savages. He remembered the picture of one savage —the one who had worn the spiral brooch. The native had held a long, slender tube in his hand. The significance of the dart hit Whiz like a sledge hammer.

"John Hanford!" he exclaimed. "He could have gotten hold of darts like that! He might've brought that one from the jungle."

"Hold it," snapped Gulliver. "Don't yo' hint that John Hanford killed this man."

"I'm not hinting anything! The man's been killed by curare and there's just one man in this part of the country, so far as we know, who has had access to the stuff! There must be some sort of connection."

Gulliver took a few grim steps and tossed the dart into the cooking fire.

"You can't do that," cried Whiz. "That's evidence. You can't burn it up."

Gulliver said, "Who can't?" and watched the flames absorb the sinister sliver of jungle death. "Them things," he said calmly, "are just too downright dangerous to have around."

CHAPTER 18

From an Old Newspaper

LEM SMILEY had learned something that had cost him his life. Tom, Whiz and Gulliver agreed on that point. They sat on the bank of the stream, revising their plans.

Tom Quest was still a little stunned by the suddenness and nearness of Lem's death. He kept glancing at the blanket-wrapped form that lay on the ground in the shade of the jeep.

"I wish he'd been able to tell us more," he murmured.

Lem's last words still rang in everyone's mind. What had he meant when he named John Hanford? What had he learned about the hotel? Why had he considered it so urgent to get the girl?

Whiz Walton said, "I've got a hunch we might learn a lot if we could talk to the girl in that hotel. Deal and

his wife lied to us about other things—we're agreed on that. Maybe they lied about the girl. Maybe she's not crazy."

"But, Whiz, they wouldn't call their own daughter crazy, if it weren't true."

"Maybe she isn't their daughter."

This was a thought that hadn't occurred to either of the others. Gulliver grunted and Tom said, "Gosh, I hadn't thought of that."

"Well, think it over," the reporter went on. "And in the meantime, tell me what we're going to do about that dead man."

"What do you think we should do?" asked Tom.

"One of us should go to Bliss and get the sheriff, or whoever represents the law, and coroner, then bring them back here so they can investigate. That," the reporter looked sternly at Gulliver, "might prove a little embarrassing. The law doesn't like it when people burn important clues."

"Hold on," Gulliver said. "Never mind what we *should* do. I'll tell yo' what we're *goin'* to do. The law ain't goin' to know a blame thing about Lem Smiley till I find John Hanford."

"But, Gulliver—"

"I don't want no lawmen interferin' with things. S'pose they find Hanford before we do an' take him out o' circulation? Then we couldn't ask him about Tom's dad."

"Then you do think he had a hand in Smiley's death?"

"Who said so?" Gulliver rasped. "I don't think nothin' o' the sort!"

"You said the law would jail him—"

"Some critters got no more imagination than a gadfly. If the law found Smiley died o' curare poisonin', an' learned that Hanford had come from the place where that stuff is made, they'd figure the case was closed right then an' there."

"Maybe they wouldn't be far off," suggested the reporter.

Gulliver's face clouded.

"If you want my opinion—" Whiz Walton began.

"I don't."

"Well, you'll get it anyway. If Hanford is guilty and you try to protect him, we're accessories after the fact and liable to the same punishment that's meted out to the murderer. Think that over, brother."

Gulliver's face twisted in thought.

"Yo' mean all three of us—includin' Tom?"

"Yes."

Gulliver scratched his chin and muttered, "Doggone."

Tom broke in. "Don't worry about me, Gulliver. You do what you think is best."

"If I was dead sure Hanford was guilty, it'd be different." The big man's manner had undergone a change. "The thing is," he continued, "he was Hamilton Quest's friend. It's likely he's bein' framed an' I'm afraid that tinhorn sheriff over to Bliss would be too addlebrained to realize it."

The reporter said, "Well, I've spoken my piece. This is your picnic and I just horned in. Do whatever you think

best, Gulliver, and count on me to stick with you. I'll see the thing through."

Tom Quest spoke up then.

"When you two get talking, I can't get a word in edgewise."

"What's on yo' mind, Tom?" asked Gulliver.

"Just this. Lem Smiley is dead and right now it doesn't matter who killed him. We've got to do something about the body. We can't leave him lying there on the ground."

Gulliver nodded gloomily and said, "I know it. I reckon we should take him into Bliss. The trouble is the law would move in as soon as we got him there."

"That can't be helped," said Whiz.

"If there was only some way we could stall the law till tomorrow—" Gulliver paused. His face brightened. "By gosh," he exclaimed, "I got it! We'll put Lem's remains in the jeep an' I'll take him to where he left his car."

"Limpy Martin's?"

"Yeah. Limpy's got a telephone. I remember seein' it on the wall. I'll tell him to put a call through to Bliss an' tell the coroner he's got a corpse that needs attention. I'll make Limpy understand that when he talks on the phone, he's to say nothin' about where he got the corpse."

"It will be noon before you get to Martin's house," Tom said.

"Yeah, an' it'll be around five o'clock before the coroner gets there from Bliss. By that time I'll be back here. When the coroner sees that Lem's been murdered, he'll take Limpy to Bliss with him to make a statement to the

law. It'll be close on to midnight before the sheriff gets the facts.

"If Limpy can stall things off so much the better. I'll tell him to keep us out of it as long as possible. But no matter how it works out, I'll be back here tonight, an' the law can't git here before sometime tomorrow. That'll give us tonight to investigate that hotel without no interference."

Whiz began to speak, but Gulliver held up a great big hand and said, "It's settled. I just settled it."

"You've settled it," retorted Whiz, "but what makes you think Limpy Martin, a law-abiding man, is going to let you dump a murdered man on his property and then run out on him? After all, Gulliver, there are some people who have more respect for the law than you seem to have."

"Nobody can call me a lawbreaker," roared Gulliver. "I don't aim to break the law. I'm goin' to bend it a little, so's we got time to act. I know what I'm doin'."

The matter seemed to be settled.

Tom and Whiz helped fill the gas tank from the spare cans and added water and oil to the jeep. Then Lem's body was placed on the floor, and Gulliver was ready to start. Before he took his seat behind the steering wheel, he made Tom and the reporter give solemn promises to remain in the camp and not go "snoopcattin' around" until he returned.

"I'll git back," he said, "as soon as I can make it."

He hiked his trousers, stepped into the jeep, raced the motor for a moment and set out.

Tom stood listening until he could no longer hear the roaring motor, then he turned to Whiz Walton.

"I don't know what you're going to do," the reporter said, "but I'm going to shave."

"While you're doing that," sad Tom, "I'll see if the water in the pails is clear enough for dishwashing."

The pails on the bank of the creek held a thick layer of sediment but the water was fairly clear. Tom filled the dishpan and started toward the campfire. It was then that he saw the folded sheet of newsprint that had been found beneath Lem Smiley's shirt and cast aside, forgotten in the subsequent events.

He placed the dishpan on the ground and picked up the wet paper. Unfolding it carefully, he spread it on the grass.

"Hey, Whiz," he called. "Look here."

The reporter squatted at Tom's side. "I forgot all about that clipping," he said. "What's it say?"

He looked at the date. It was several months old.

The story gave a detailed account of a daylight robbery. A daring gang of thieves had looted an armored truck on the way to the bank with the receipts of one of the largest stores in Texas. The thieves had struck when Christmas shopping had swelled the receipts to extraordinary size.

"I remember that job," said Whiz. "It had nation-wide publicity."

Tom said, "I didn't think anyone could rob those armored cars."

"That's why the robbery made the newspapers all over

the country. Those crooks did a neat job and got away with a pile of money."

"But how could they do it?"

"Everything was worked out perfectly. A car just ahead of the truck seemingly stalled at a traffic light. The crooks had planned it that way. While the cars behind were sounding their horns and making an unholy racket, one of the gang got out of the "stalled" car with a small satchel. Before anybody knew what was going on, he shoved it under the unarmored belly of the armored truck. When what was inside the satchel went off, the truck was smashed to smithereens. Another car came alongside and masked men hopped out. Some held machine guns on the witnesses while others tossed the cash into the getaway car. The cop at the traffic intersection never had a chance. The whole thing was over in less than a minute. The two cars full of crooks and the bags of cash were gone. In the traffic jam that resulted they weren't even followed."

"Did they ever catch the thieves?" asked Tom.

The reporter shook his head. "I don't think so," he said. "The job looked like the work of Ace Carmody—it had all the refinements of Carmody's work."

"Who's he?"

"Right now, I guess he's one of the cleverest criminals at large. The police and Federal men are pretty sure he has been mixed up in a number of bank robberies and kidnapings, but they can't prove anything. They picked him up for questioning in connection with this job, but, as usual, he had an alibi that no one could break down."

The reporter looked perplexed. "I wonder why Lem Smiley had this clipping," he muttered.

Tom shook his head slowly, "Don't ask me."

He picked up the limp paper and turned it over. John Hanford's name appeared in a headline on the other side.

"This is it," said Tom. "This is why Lem Smiley had the clipping. We were reading the wrong side."

The story told about John Hanford's return to Florida after ten years in the South American jungle.

It was made up of the usual trite remarks—Hanford's intention to rest for several months—his uncertainty about future plans—how good it was to be back in the States, and a few statements concerning the engineer's work prior to the expedition.

It also mentioned Barbara, his stepdaughter, who had inherited valuable oil leases and mining properties in Texas, but there were no details about the ten years in the South American jungle. "The engineer," read the article, "hopes to blot those years of horror out of his life. At this writing he is living quietly with his wife and stepdaughter, recovering from the ravages of jungle fever."

Whiz Walton saw nothing of particular interest in the columns until he came to a paragraph near the end. He scanned it quickly, then let out a low, exclamatory whistle.

He pointed to the paragraph and said, "Skip the rest, Tom. Just read this."

The paragraph dealt with souvenirs brought by the engineer from the head-hunter country. It described a human head that had been shrunk by the natives until it

was no larger than an orange. It told of knives and spears and other weapons. The line that struck Whiz Walton read, ". . . *also had a six-foot blowgun and an assortment of tufted darts steeped in the deadly poison, curare.*"

CHAPTER 19

The Creek That Ran Roily at Night

TOM QUEST and Whiz found time hanging heavily on their hands while they waited for Gulliver to return. Whiz had finished shaving and Tom had washed the breakfast dishes. The camp had been cleaned up and an ample supply of firewood stacked near the small stone oven. By that time it was only ten o'clock in the morning and Gulliver couldn't be expected until sundown. A long day lay ahead.

The reporter spread a blanket beneath a large cottonwood tree and invited Tom to sit down.

"Let's run over what we know and what we don't know," he suggested. "Let's see if we can fill in any spaces."

Tom sprawled on his stomach and stuck a blade of

grass between his teeth. "We hardly know anything," he said.

"Well, let's start at the beginning. We know that John Hanford and his stepdaughter got as far as Bliss."

"They got farther than that."

The reporter nodded. "They persuaded Lem Smiley to guide them to the Horsehead Hotel—"

"And leave them there."

There was a moment of silence while Whiz considered Tom's addition.

Then the reporter nodded slowly and said, "Yes, I guess we can be fairly sure he left them at the hotel. He started back for Bliss on foot but for some reason decided to camp here for the night.

"During the night, he heard a woman sobbing and that rumbling in the ground. The next day some stranger gave him a lift back to Bliss. Then he left on a hunting trip which I'm sure was just an excuse to put his rifle in the car. He didn't go hunting. He went back to Limpy Martin's, left his car and started out on foot for Horsehead. Those are the facts we know."

"We know he got to Horsehead after he started out on foot," said Tom.

The reporter said, "Here's how it looks to me. Lem heard or saw something in the hotel that made him suspicious. That's why he decided to spend the night near by. He must have gone back if he heard the girl crying," Whiz pointed out.

Tom nodded. "He could have heard the rumbling here in camp," he commented, "but he probably went back if he heard the girl."

"From here on we've got to do some guessing. Listen to this, Tom, and tell me if it sounds logical. After Lem left Limpy Martin's, he managed to get to the hotel and was captured. While he was there he found that old newspaper clipping. He may have been on hand and heard what Deal and his wife told us yesterday. Early this morning he tried to escape. Someone shot or stabbed him with that dart. He got as far as the creek before the poison took hold."

"But, Whiz, we're not sure the dart caused his death."

"I'll bet on it," replied the columnist.

"But the dart was loose inside his shirt," argued Tom.

"I saw where the dart hit him," Whiz said. "There was a little spot on his chest."

"There was? I didn't see it."

"His shirt was half open. The dart struck his chest, then fell inside the shirt."

"Then Lem must have been facing the man who shot the dart. He knew who it was."

Whiz nodded. "Yeah," he said. "And the only name he mentioned was—Hanford."

"But look here, Whiz, Hanford never saw Lem Smiley before he got to Bliss. There was no reason for Hanford to kill Lem. It doesn't make sense."

Whiz shrugged his shoulders. "There are a lot of things that don't make sense. Why didn't he get in touch with Gulliver as soon as he got back from South America? Why did he stay there in Florida when he knew you and Gulliver were alive? If your big pal hadn't happened to see that photograph, it might've been years before you knew that Hanford was safe."

Tom shook his head slowly.

"I can't figure it out," he said. Then, with a trace of hope in his voice, he added, "Hanford may have a perfectly logical explanation for everything."

"If and when we can find him."

Tom Quest took the blade of grass out of his mouth and looked up at the reporter.

"Do you," he asked, "think Hanford and his daughter are still in that hotel?"

"Your guess is as good as mine."

"You said Lem might have been held prisoner. Maybe that's what happened to Hanford and his daughter. Maybe they're there right now."

Whiz smiled without humor. "That's just the point, Tom. Maybe they are. They'd have to be if Hanford is the killer."

"But I don't think Hanford is the killer."

Tom Quest sat up suddenly. "Look here, Whiz," he continued, "put yourself in the place of the murderer. Would you use a weapon that could be traced directly to you? Not by a jugful. You'd try to throw suspicion on someone else. Isn't that logical?"

The reporter admitted that it was.

"If Hanford had owned a gun that was registered in his name, the crooks might've used his gun on Lem," Tom went on. "But he had something that was even better than a gun. He had those blowpipe darts! There probably aren't more than a handful of men in the country with darts that've been tipped with curare. The killer used the dart so John Hanford would be blamed for the

murder. Then, just to make doubly certain, he stuck that newspaper clipping beneath Lem's shirt."

"That's logical reasoning, Tom."

"Of course it is! Don't you see the point, Whiz? The fact that Lem was killed by the dart is proof that Hanford did *not* kill him."

Whiz Walton looked doubtful on this point.

"If Hanford planned to kill a man, he'd use a gun or a knife! The last thing in the world he'd use would be a curare dart that he'd brought from South America."

Whiz said, "There's just one trouble, Tom."

"What's that?"

"Your theory is good. It's sound reasoning and it's logical. But the police don't look at things as you do. They're guided by cold, hard facts. So are members of juries. If it's found that Hanford was near Lem Smiley at the time of the murder, and if an autopsy shows that Lem died from curare poison, it's going to be mighty tough for Hanford to prove his innocence."

Tom looked down and ran his finger thoughtfully on the pattern in the blanket.

After a pause he said, "Whiz, let's not say anything to Gulliver."

"Why not?"

"I don't think Hanford is involved, but if he is, Gulliver will find it out sooner or later. It won't help any to get him all steamed up ahead of time."

The clipping, by this time, was quite dry. The reporter picked it up, folded it and tucked it in his wallet.

"If you want to clam up, Tom, it's all right with me."

He yawned deeply. "The big guy won't be back before sundown. I'm going to take a nap."

"I'm not tired," Tom said.

"A little sleep wouldn't do you any harm. We were up most of last night with an ear to the ground—I mean literally, and the night before last we were on that train to Bliss. Things may be lively tonight."

The reporter stretched out on the blanket with a handkerchief over his face as a protection against the sun and insects. In a few minutes, he slept.

Tom closed his eyes and presently a languor crept over him. Then he, too, was sound asleep.

When he wakened, he was surprised at the length of the shadows. He glanced at his watch and learned that he had been asleep for several hours. He sat up quickly and muttered, "Gosh, it's almost time for Gulliver to get back."

He heard a shout.

"Hey, Tom! Come here."

It was Whiz calling from the bank of the creek.

"Look at this," the reporter said when Tom reached his side. He pointed to the stream which was as clear as spring water.

"What in blazes," Whiz demanded, "has become of all the mud?"

"How long has it been clear?" Tom asked.

"I don't know. I just woke up. I came over here to douse my head with some of the water you'd left to settle in the pails and then I saw the stream. I can't—"

Whiz Walton didn't finish his sentence. He was cut off by a jangle that marked Gulliver's return.

Gulliver came zigzagging among the trees at top speed, then put the brakes on with such force that the jeep seemed to arch in the middle.

"Beat sundown by an hour," he observed as Tom and Whiz came up. "I'd o' made much better time if Limpy Martin had agreed to things first-off."

"Did you have any trouble with him?" asked Tom.

"A little, but I got him to see things my way."

"I hope you didn't massage his skull like you did the storekeeper's," the columnist said dryly.

"Naw, nothin' like that. I didn't have to lay a hand on him. I'll tell yo' just what happened."

Gulliver threw one leg over the side of the car and leaned back in the seat.

"I got in to Limpy Martin's driveway without bein' seen by Limpy. I moved Smiley from my car to the back seat o' his."

"His Buick was still in the garage?" asked Tom.

Gulliver nodded. "Then I went inside the house an' told Martin what I'd done an' said I wanted to use his telephone. He fussed like a hen with chickens an' asked no end o' questions, but I calmed him down some. Then I called the coroner at Bliss an' told him he better come to Limpy's place an' collect a body."

Gulliver finished with an apologetic look at Tom.

"I had to do a little fibbin'—"

"About what?"

Gulliver took off his battered hat and slapped out some of the dust.

"What I done," he said challengingly, "I done because the law around here has got a way o' jumpin' at things an' solvin' 'em real quick—right or wrong. I don't aim to have the law mixin' in till I got things cleared so's Hanford won't be under no suspicion."

"All right, Gulliver," Tom said patiently. "What did you do?"

"I told the coroner I found the corpse in the canyon north o' here."

"Did you tell him who you were?"

"No, but he knowed me. He called me by name."

"Your voice does have a certain distinction." Whiz didn't mean the remark as a compliment, but Gulliver took it that way.

He favored the reporter with a beaming look and then went on. "I told the coroner I had some things to take care of an' when I got around to it, I'd stop in his office an' give him the details."

"What did he say to that?"

"I dunno, Tom, I didn't wait to see. I just told him an' hung up."

"All he has to do," said Whiz, "is call back on the telephone and ask Limpy where you went."

"There ain't no one goin' to call Limpy on the telephone."

Gulliver reached on the floor in the back of the jeep and held up the telephone that had been fastened to Limpy Martin's wall. The screws still protruded from the

back with bits of plaster clinging to them, and the wires dangled with frayed ends like trailing roots.

"I brought the phone along with me," he said simply.

"You mean," exclaimed Whiz Walton, "you tore it out!"

"It didn't take much tearin'. It warn't put up none too solid."

"Even that won't help much," the reporter countered. "The coroner will probably take the sheriff to Limpy Martin's place with him and Martin will spill the works. I'll bet all the tea in China that by this time the law is burning up the road to get here and question you."

"That," replied Gulliver, "is what made me a little late. I had to talk that point out with Limpy. He finally promised me he'd keep his trap shut."

Gulliver's massive fingers were toying with the telephone wires. He fashioned one in the form of a noose and slipped it over his upheld thumb.

"If," demanded Whiz, "you didn't manhandle him, how did you persuade him to keep still?"

"Aw-w, we just talked it out. I told him how I'd be downright riled if things didn't go like I wanted 'em to go. Then I told him that when I got riled I sometimes done things in a sort o' *permanent* way."

Gulliver emphasized the last two words by a sudden jerk on the cord that tightened the noose about his thumb.

Tom grinned and Whiz Walton nodded knowingly, muttering, "I see what you mean."

Gulliver grunted, "Uh-huh. So did Limpy, only it took him longer'n it did yo'."

Gulliver released his thumb and tossed the telephone back to the floor.

"Limpy won't know nothin' about nothin'," he said, climbing from the car. "Now let's see about some supper. While I'm fixin' things, I'll tell yo' what we're goin' to do tonight. I made the plans while I was drivin' back here."

He hiked his dungarees, strode to the medicine chest and threw back the lid.

"I figure," he said as he made a careful selection of jars and bottles of spices and condiments, "we won't git no place by talkin' to Deal an' his wife. Them two critters can't be trusted no more'n a woman's watch. We got to git inside that hotel an' find out things for ourselves."

"How?" asked Tom.

"When it's dark, we'll move up to the back o' the place. I'll boost yo' to the roof o' that car shed. Yo' can find somewheres to tie a rope an' then I can climb up to join yo' while Whiz stands guard. We'll force a window an' go inside. Then we'll do some lookin' around."

"Holy mackerel!" exclaimed Whiz. "You burned the poisoned dart which may have been a murder weapon—you tore out Martin's telephone—malicious mischief or something like that according to the law—and now you plan to make an illegal entry!"

Gulliver looked at the reporter with a squint in one eye.

"Whiz," he said slowly, "when yo' was writin' for that

newspaper outfit, yo' didn't always worry about every little tish-tush rulin', did yo'?"

Whiz grinned without committing himself.

Gulliver eyed the reporter steadily and said, "Lemme tell yo' somethin', son. If yo' want to make an omelet, yo' gotta break some eggs."

"I hope," Tom muttered thoughtfully, "the omelet is worth it."

CHAPTER 20

The Rescue

TOM QUEST rinsed the dishpan, dried it and placed it with the rest of the cooking utensils. He hung the towel next to one Whiz Walton had used, on a rope stretched between two trees.

"That," he said, rolling down his sleeves and buttoning them at the wrists, "takes care of the dishwashing."

He pointed to the gun belt lying on the grass.

"Put that on, Whiz, and we'll be all set to go whenever Gulliver is ready."

The reporter's eyes held a mischievous glint that hadn't been there since his escapades of college days. He was grinning like a schoolboy.

"I don't know what we're in for," he said, "but I bet we won't be bored."

Tom said, "Tie the holster to your leg so it won't flap."

Rawhide thongs dangled from the bottom of the hol-

ster. Whiz, following Tom's suggestion, passed these once around his thigh and tied a firm knot.

"How's that?" he asked.

Tom nodded approvingly. "Just one thing more, Whiz. You had better let me jingle you."

" 'Jingle' me?"

Tom chuckled. "If I don't, Gulliver will, and he's likely to be pretty rough about it."

Tom slapped the reporter's chest and sides. Coins jingled in one of the pockets.

"That's what I mean," Tom said. "When you're trying to move quietly, you can't take a chance on having a jingle give you away. Put the coins in your handkerchief and tie it in a tight knot, then you'll be all right."

Gulliver came from the jeep with a coil of half-inch rope resting on his shoulders and a large electric torch sticking out of a hip pocket. He, too, wore his holster tied down.

"It'll be dark in another few minutes," he said. "I reckon we can start out pretty quick. There may be a guard watchin' the road, so we'll have to foller the bank o' the crick an' approach the hotel from the rear. I'll go ahead an' yo' two foller about fifty feet or so in back o' me. Then, if there's a trap of any kind, all three of us won't git in it. Now stand still for inspection."

The big man eyed Whiz Walton from feet to head.

Tom said, "I've jingled him, Gulliver. He's quiet."

Gulliver nodded and said, "How about yo', Tom?"

Tom slapped the pockets of his dungarees and then the pockets of his shirt.

"I reckon yo'll do."

Gulliver turned to Whiz and said, "Jinglin' stuff is bad when yo' go stalkin'. I've heard o' cases where a man stopped a bullet on account of a couple o' pennies in his pocket—one jinglin' agin the other."

"I promise," the reporter replied, "you won't hear a nickel's worth of jingle from me."

"If I do," Gulliver said soberly, "I'll stop it sudden. Let's shove on."

Gulliver had an Indianlike way of placing the leading foot firmly on the ground before shifting his weight to that foot. He managed to move with no more sound than a shadow, but with surprising speed. Tom Quest and Whiz found it hard to hold the gap to fifty feet as they followed along the bank of the softly rippling moonlit stream.

When Gulliver reached the edge of the cottonwoods, he paused and waited for Tom and Whiz to catch up. The hotel, now a hundred yards away, stood out in bold relief against the starry sky. From that point on, the three kept close together, and crouched low as they proceeded slowly and cautiously. They reached a point on the shore directly in back of the hotel. There they paused to study the situation.

The shadow of the big square building fell across the hard-packed area to Loafer Creek and beyond. The car shed was barely visible. Rooms on the first floor along one side of the hotel were illuminated—the light slanted down to fall in square patches on the driveway—but the rear windows were dark.

Tom Quest nudged Gulliver and pointed toward the kitchen door where a man sat in the shadows on a chair that was tilted back against the building.

"That may be a guard," Tom said in a voice much softer than the gurgling of the creek.

Gulliver nodded and said, "Yo' an' Whiz wait here till I signal with one blink o' the flashlight."

He moved silently away, his dark clothes merging with the shadows. Tom and Whiz waited silently. It was a matter of moments, but it seemed like years.

They could see Gulliver as a vague figure moving toward the guard, but their imagination filled in the details.

The guard struck a match to light a cigarette. Then Gulliver appeared and touched him on the shoulder. The man leaped to his feet as if his chair had suddenly become a red-hot griddle charged with electricity.

His gasp of surprise was clearly audible to Tom and the reporter. Gulliver gave the man no chance to cry out. He brought his fist up in a short, sharp jab on the point of the chin. It sounded like a snapping twig.

Then Gulliver blinked his flashlight—once.

Tom and Whiz joined him at the side of the man who sprawled unconscious on the ground.

Whiz got his orders.

"Yo' stand right here next to this critter," Gulliver said. "In fact, it'd be better if yo' was to squat down so's yo' could watch his eyes real close. I don't want him to make us no trouble."

While the big man spoke, his hands were busy with a

short length of heavy fish line from one of his capacious pockets. He crossed the wrists of the unconscious guard and tied them with a few deft turns.

"Keep yo' gun in yo' hand," he went on in a throaty whisper. "If yo' see his eyelids flutterin', just tap his noggin with the gun bar'l. Right now he's as stiff as a fangin' snake, but he may not stay that way."

Whiz nodded. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a brief instant. "Assault and battery," he sighed. "On top of everything else. There'll be enough to put me away for the next one hundred years."

Gulliver and Tom Quest moved toward the open front of the car shed. Tom took out his small flashlight and poured the tiny beam into all corners. Then he went inside and looked in each of the cars. Satisfied that there would be no surprise from that source, he rejoined Gulliver.

Tom knew each step of the plans. He took off his shoes and placed them next to one of the posts that supported the sloping roof of the car shed. Gulliver handed him the coil of rope and squatted low.

Tom stepped to his friend's broad shoulders. When Gulliver stood up, the boy could reach the edge of the roof without effort. His fingers gripped a metal gutter. He tested it and found it firm, then pulled himself up with the easy grace of an athlete.

Catlike, he made his way on hands and feet to the wall of the hotel and felt around the nearest window for a nail—anything to which he might fasten the rope so

Gulliver could join him—but found nothing that would serve.

He tried to look through the window, but the shade was tightly drawn and close-fitting. Soundlessly he tried the window, but it was locked securely. He moved to a second window, but this, as well as the third and last one, was securely locked and well shaded.

He decided to carry his search farther. If he could get inside he could tie one end of the rope to a piece of heavy furniture.

He took a strong knife from his hip pocket, opened the heaviest blade and inserted it in the crack between the sashes. By working the blade sideways he managed to force the latch to one side. Then he paused and listened. He raised the window a couple of inches, then paused and listened again.

Hearing nothing, he reached through the opening and pushed the shade back far enough to make sure the room was dark, then he placed the coil of rope on the roof, opened the window wide and stepped into the room.

The moment his feet touched the floor, he felt a curious, prickling sensation. Some sixth sense told him he was not alone in the room. He stood motionless and rigid, every muscle tense and every nerve straining. He felt his own heartbeats in his throat.

He tried to penetrate the total darkness. He thought of raising the shade, but immedately rejected the idea. It would outline him far more effectively than it would reveal to him the interior of the room. He waited until

his throbbing pulse subsided. Then he thought he heard faint breathing in the room. He couldn't be sure of it—it might be his imagination—but he had to know. He couldn't proceed without knowing who, if anyone, was with him in the gloom.

He decided to risk a light. The pencillike beam of his torch splashed on a bare floor, then moved to explore the room. There was a wall on Tom's right. A small chest supporting a large wash pitcher and basin stood against that wall. Directly ahead, he saw a closed door. The beam of light moved to the left, following the wall to the far corner. Then, on his left, Tom Quest saw the high footboard of an old-fashioned bed—and then a pair of feet!

Once more the lump rose to his throat and a hard pulse beat in his temples. He moved the light full on the bed and saw the girl!

Her eyes were wide open, staring straight into the light. They were blue eyes, set in a pale, thin face that was surrounded by soft waves of blonde hair. The girl's mouth was distorted by a gag. From her neck to her waist, she was rigidly encased in a device of rough canvas of the sort used to suppress the violently insane. The girl wore a strait jacket.

CHAPTER 21

John Hanford's Stepdaughter

WHIZ WALTON held his gun in readiness but hoped the guard would remain unconscious. It wouldn't take much of a blow from such a weapon to crack a human skull. The reporter didn't want to use it as a bludgeon, but he knew that Tom Quest's life might depend on keeping the guard quiet.

He bent over to look at the man's face for the first sign of returning consciousness. Then he looked more closely. There was something familiar about the face.

Holstering his gun, Whiz grabbed the guard beneath the armpits and dragged him from the shadow of the house into the shed where the cars were parked. When he was sure that he could not be seen from the windows of the hotel, he dropped his burden and lit a match.

"Holy mackerel!" Whiz exclaimed.

He pulled out his wallet and flipped it open. It was one of those wallets that opened like a book with a number of celluloid envelopes as pages. These windows held cards of identification and membership, but the reporter planned to put them to another use. He polished them on his sleeve, then placed the open wallet on the ground while he cut the guard's wrists loose with his pocketknife.

Sitting astride the fallen man, the reporter pressed each of his fingers against the slick celluloid surface. Then he folded the wallet on a clearly distinguishable set of fingerprints and put it into his pocket.

The guard stirred and moaned softly. He opened his eyes and lifted his head. He saw the reporter and opened his mouth to yell but the yell stopped somewhere behind his teeth. Whiz Walton stopped it with his fist. It was a clean, sharp hook that snapped the guard's head back against the hard-packed ground. The guard's eyes closed and he was once more limp.

"That," grunted Whiz, "had better hold you, brother. If it doesn't, I'll use the gun barrel and in your case I won't care particularly if I crack your skull."

He used the guard's own shoelaces to retie his hands.

In the meantime, Tom Quest had recovered from his first shock of surprise at finding the slender girl in the strait jacket. He bent over the bed and held the flashlight so it revealed his own face. He held a finger to his lips as a gesture of warning and whispered, "Don't make a sound. I'm going to get you out of here."

He placed the flashlight on the bed, then used his knife to cut the tape about the girl's mouth and slash through the intricate lacings of the strait jacket.

It never occurred to Tom Quest that he might be doing the wrong thing. Even the fact that he had invaded the privacy of a girl's bedchamber did not strike him. Here was a person in great danger. She had to be set free! Had he followed Gulliver's instructions, he would have left the girl where she lay until he had fixed the rope so Gulliver could climb through the window and join him, but he ignored all previous plans.

There was an urgency in the blue eyes that made him feel that the rescue of the girl was more important than anything else. The girl's throat was dry and her mouth had been strained by the cruel gag. Tom noticed her futile efforts to speak.

"Don't try to talk," he said. "Wait until we get out of here. I have friends waiting outside. Do you understand me?"

She nodded and struggled to a sitting position on the edge of the bed while Tom stepped to the window and raised the shade.

Turning back into the room, he swung the beam of the flashlight around until he found two low-heeled walking shoes. He tucked these in his pocket. On a small table Tom found a handbag.

He picked it up and whispered, "Yours?"

The girl nodded.

"Is there anything else?"

She shook her head.

With Tom's supporting arm about her slim waist, the girl managed the few short steps to the window. Tom picked her up and lifted her to the sloping roof, then climbed after her.

He dropped the coil of rope around his neck, then helped the girl down the incline.

Gulliver had been waiting uneasily for Tom to secure the rope and lower one end so he might reach the roof. From where he stood, he couldn't see the roof. He waited with increasing impatience, wondering what was taking Tom so long. Then he heard a faint scraping sound on the shingles. He looked up, expecting to see the rope snake over the gutter. Instead, he saw a pale, thin face surrounded by a halo of light hair.

Then Tom Quest appeared at the girl's side and made motions that Gulliver understood. He reached up and gripped the girl's waist as Tom, holding her by the hands, lowered her from the roof.

An instant later, Tom swung over the edge and dropped lightly to the ground.

Gulliver bent to look closely at the girl's face. Even in the shadows, he could see her eyes meet his own with a steady gaze.

In a few whispered words, Tom Quest told how he had found the girl in a strait jacket.

Gulliver whispered hoarsely, "She don't look loco to me."

"I thought," Tom said, "if we got her out of there, we might learn more from her than we could by prowling around inside the building."

"What's yo' name?"

The girl's lips moved, but no sound came forth. She turned to Tom with an appealing look.

"She can't speak," Tom explained. "She had a gag in her mouth."

"I got the fixin's for that," Gulliver fumbled in one of the breast pockets of his shirt and found a small pasteboard box.

He extended this to the girl and said, "Take one. I always carry 'em at a time like this in case I feel a sneeze or a cough comin' on. Just slosh it around in yo' mouth an' yo'll be able to speak up in no time."

The girl put one of the small lozenges in her mouth and tears immediately sprang to her eyes.

"I got a friend who makes 'em up special for me. They're a little lively, but they do the trick."

In the dim light Tom could see the muscles of the girl's slender white throat contract as she struggled with Gulliver's fiery concoction. But she was game. She nodded gratefully and tried to smile.

A considerable degree of her strength seemed to have returned. She was able to stand without aid. Tom crouched low and held her shoes while she slipped her feet into them. Then he put on his own.

He rose and said, "Gulliver, maybe we'd better get this girl away from here. We can return later."

Gulliver turned to the girl and said, "Do yo' feel up to walkin' a couple o' hundred yards?"

She nodded.

To Tom the big man said, "Yo' stick by 'er, Tom. Git

over to the crick, then foller 'er downstream till yo' come to the cottonwoods. Wait there."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'll be right along soon's I git Whiz Walton."

"You're not trying to sidetrack me so you can bust into that place alone, are you, Gulliver?"

"Aw-w, now, Tom, I wouldn't do nothin' like that. Yo' just go along an' I'll be with yo'. The chances are me an' Whiz'll catch up to yo' before yo' reach the cottonwoods. Yo'll have to go slow on account o' the gal."

Tom said, "All right."

He guided the girl to the edge of Loafer Creek, then followed the bank to the shelter of the cottonwoods. In spite of Gulliver's surmise, they reached their destination before Tom's friends came out of the shadow of the hotel.

Tom's companion smoothed out her slacks and sweater coat. Then she opened her handbag and found a comb which she ran through her hair.

"Do you feel a little better?" Tom asked.

"Yes." The girl's eyes went wide. "Oh," she said, "I've found my voice!"

"You better not try to talk for a little while."

"But I—I must talk. I must tell you how grateful I am. I—I think I would have lost my mind if I'd had to stay in that horrible place much longer."

"Aren't your parents there?"

"No," she said.

"Then you're not the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Deal?"

The girl shuddered and said, "No, of course not."

"In that case, I bet I know who you are."

"You do?"

Tom nodded. "You're Barbara Hanford."

"My name," the girl replied, "is Barbara Moore. John Hanford is my stepfather."

"But why were you laced up in a strait jacket and gagged in that room?"

"That's what I want to know," the girl answered, "and I'm going to find out."

Just then the sound of a strangled cry came from the direction of the hotel. It was followed by the sound of a blow, then silence.

Tom could see the hotel between the trees. Windows that had been dark broke out in light.

Gulliver and Whiz were coming on the run.

The rear door burst open. Guns barked. Tom could see the flashes. Gulliver slowed, half turned, and his own heavy gun boomed three times. Someone at the door cried out in pain.

Then Whiz Walton leaped to the shelter of the cottonwoods with Gulliver a yard or so behind.

"Git gittin'!" bellowed Gulliver. "This ain't no time to talk. Not yo'," he roared at Whiz. "Yo' stay here with me. Tom's got to git that gal back to the camp. Me an' yo' will stay here an' if any o' them Horsehead critters come this way, we'll dish out triple-twisted, six-gun trouble for 'em."

He slapped Tom on the shoulder. "Go on, yo' Tom," he cried. "Scramble!"

CHAPTER 22

Barbara's Story

THE HALF-MILE walk to camp was a strenuous trip for Barbara and a trying one for Tom. The girl had been weakened by her ordeal, but she refused to stop and rest.

Tom had little to say. His mind was with Whiz Walton and Gulliver. His ears were tuned for any sound that would indicate a renewal of hostilities, but he heard nothing beyond the familiar noises of the night and the rippling of Loafer Creek.

Tom found the campfire almost out. He spread a blanket for Barbara to sit on, then built up a small fire and started a pot of coffee. He looked at the girl, curled like a kitten on the blanket.

"Would you like something to eat?" he asked.

The girl shook her head without opening her eyes. "Just let me rest for a little while," she said drowsily. "Just a little while and then I want to know all about

you and your friends. Who you are—why you came to get me—" Her voice trailed off.

Tom shook out a second blanket and spread it over the slender shoulders.

A few minutes later, Gulliver came into camp alone.

He sniffed and muttered, "Coffee, eh? Good thinkin', Tom. I'll have a cup right now."

"Where's Whiz?" asked Tom.

"I left him a little ways back among the cottonwoods to stand guard. From now on we can't take no chances. Things are poppin'. I expected some o' them critters at the hotel to come after us, but they seemed to lose stomach for gunplay when I nicked one of 'em in the leg."

"How many are in that hotel?"

"I dunno, Tom. I saw two men in the back door an' there was another at a window. When they started shootin' I didn't stay around to count noses."

He motioned toward the girl.

"She asleep?" he asked.

"I guess so."

"Who is she?"

"John Hanford's stepdaughter."

Gulliver nodded as he filled a cup with steaming coffee.

"I reckon I had a sort o' hunch about that," he said. "Has she told yo' anythin' about John Hanford?"

"No. There wasn't much chance to talk on the way back from the hotel, and she was too tired to talk when we got here."

Gulliver tossed off the coffee—scalding hot. He wiped

his mouth on the sleeve of his shirt and said, "We oughtta learn a few things from 'er when she wakes up."

"What started all the shooting?" Tom inquired.

"Whiz an' me both got kind o' careless."

"How's that?"

"You remember that guard I massaged?"

"Yeah—"

"We left Whiz watchin' him—"

"I know."

"Well, I went to get Whiz an' tell him we was goin' to clear out for the time bein', but he was downright excited about somethin' he'd learned about that guard."

"What did he learn?"

"We didn't git that far. He just started to tell me when his nibs let out the first part of a yowl. I stopped it sudden, but part of it got away from me. Yo' seen what happened after that."

"I sure did."

"Now more'n ever, we gotta see what's cookin' over to that there hotel. I hate to wake that gal up, but I gotta know if John Hanford is around there, an' I gotta know why Steve Deal is such a downright liar."

The girl's voice spoke from a few yards away.

"I'm awake." Barbara was sitting up, tailor fashion, on the blanket.

"Doggone, Miss Hanford, I sure am glad to—"

"My name," interrupted the girl, "is Moore. I've never taken the name of my stepfather."

Gulliver said, "Oh—"

"I barely knew him until he returned from South

America. You see, I was quite young when Mother married the second time, and Mr. Hanford went away soon after that marriage."

"Where in thunder," Gulliver demanded, "is John Hanford?"

Barbara shook her head slowly and said, "I don't know. I wish I did."

"You and he came to Horsehead together, didn't you?" asked Tom.

"Yes."

"About two weeks ago?"

Barbara thought for a moment. "I—I guess it was two weeks ago," she said hesitantly. "I've lost track of time. Now let me ask some questions. Who are you? Why did you rescue me?"

"We'll git to that in just a minute," Gulliver put in. "What I want to know is why John Hanford come to Horsehead."

"He came to discuss some property," replied the girl promptly. "You see, Father's people were fairly well off and after Father died—my own father, I mean—the estate came to me. My mother is my guardian, but executors handle my money. John Hanford heard of some valuable mining property and he came here to learn more about it. He planned to meet a man in Horsehead and then visit the ranch of an old friend."

"So that's why he came here," Tom said. "But why didn't you let your mother know where you were? She is worried sick about you."

"I don't understand," Barbara exclaimed in surprise,

"I wrote Mother every day until we got here to Horsehead."

"Did you mail the letters?" Tom asked.

"Why, my stepfather must have mailed them," she said slowly. "But how did my mother get in touch with you? Is she all right?"

"Gulliver had a telegram. Barbara, did Hanford ever mention Hamilton Quest to you?" he inquired.

"Quest? Quest," Barbara pondered. "The name is familiar," she murmured.

Tom fairly stopped breathing. He leaned forward.

"There was a Hamilton Quest on the expedition to South America."

"Yes," Tom said tensely. "Did Mr. Hanford mention him? Did he say anything about him?"

The girl seemed to be thinking hard.

After a pause she spoke slowly. "He mentioned him."

"Did he say whether he was dead or alive?"

Barbara shook her head. "I think he said something about Hamilton Quest and a number of other men who were massacred."

"I—I see," Tom said with a slight tremble in his voice.

"Why?"

"He was my father."

"Hamilton Quest? Your father, Tom?"

Tom nodded. He was at a loss for words.

Gulliver spoke up. "My name's Gulliver. Did Hanford mention somethin' about me?"

"You? You're Gulliver?"

The big man nodded.

"But my stepfather went to meet you at your ranch. Didn't you see him?"

"How long ago did he leave?"

"The morning after we reached the hotel. He took the car and drove off. He said the Deals would look after me. I objected, but my stepfather insisted. He seemed very nervous and very determined."

"If," muttered Gulliver, "he went to my ranch, he went in a mighty roundabout way. It ain't but a day's drive to get there."

"Something must have happened to him. I wondered why he was away so long. He expected to be back in three or four days."

Gulliver said, "There's more to this than we know about. If he drove to my ranch, why in tarnation didn't he wait there?"

"When we got to the hotel, he learned that the people who were to tell us about the mining investments wouldn't arrive for a week. He thought he'd see you in the meantime. He came to my room and told me that he was going to call on you. He made it very plain that I was to wait in the hotel."

"So he left the next morning?"

Barbara nodded. "And—and then"—she shuddered—"things began to happen."

"We gotta hear about 'em," Gulliver said, "but first, tell me this. How many people did yo' see in that hotel?"

"I saw Mr. and Mrs. Deal and two or three others, but I'm sure there were more."

"What about Lem Smiley?"

"Lem Smiley?"

"He's the one that drove up here with yo' from Bliss."

"Oh, yes. He left us and started right back."

"Did he say he aimed to camp for the night somewheres near Horsehead?"

Barbara shook her head.

"All right," muttered Gulliver. "Never mind Lem Smiley. How did it happen yo' was hog-tied in one o' them 'can't-move-a-muscle' kimonos with yo' mouth plugged?"

Barbara Moore hesitated. "I—I think I better tell you and Tom just what happened," she said. "When I wakened the morning after we arrived, Mrs. Deal told me my stepfather had left in the car soon after sunrise. She said breakfast was ready and led the way to a room on the first floor."

The girl shuddered slightly. "It—it was like a prison cell," she said. "There was just one door—the one we entered, and the only window was a tiny opening less than eight inches square. Some food was set out on a table. I looked at it, then turned quickly when I heard the door close behind me. I was alone in the room. The door was locked. I pounded on the door and shouted, but it did no good. I—I don't know how long they kept me in that room, but it must have been more than a week."

"Didn't they feed yo'?" asked Gulliver.

"Yes. Twice a day two men came to the door with food. At first I tried to fight my way out, but I soon realized that it was no use."

"Have yo'," asked Gulliver, "any notion why yo' was held prisoner?"

The girl nodded. "Yes," she said, "I think I know the answer. I'm sure those people in the hotel are crooks! I think they had some kind of scheme to collect ransom money. Perhaps they thought they might be able to get it from my stepfather, not realizing that he has no control over my money."

"Who has?" asked Gulliver.

"The executors—a bank in Florida. Perhaps when they found they couldn't collect from my stepfather, they did something to him! He may have been killed!"

Tom Quest looked up quickly at this latest suggestion. "That," he said, "would account for a lot of things! Don't you see, Gulliver? There's a gang in that hotel and they got Mr. Hanford to come out here with Barbara."

"Maybe so," replied Gulliver, "but that *don't* account for a lot o' things, like the strait jacket for example."

Barbara said, "I can tell you about that. Yesterday, I heard a car drive up. Then I heard pounding on the doors. I thought it might be someone who could help me. I screamed."

"That was me apoundin'," Gulliver said. "It was that there screamin' an' the way ole Horseface Deal an' her husband acted an' talked that took us back to that place tonight."

Barbara went on. "After you left, I was taken to that room on the second floor, and tied and gagged." She looked at Tom. "Just as you found me."

Tom nodded and said, "Someone cried in the night—the first night you were there. Was it you?"

"Not the first night, Tom. I—I guess I did cry last night. They came and removed the gag so I could sleep, and I—I was so weak and so discouraged, I—well, I hate crying women, but I cried last night."

"Someone cried the first night you were there."

"Oh, I remember," Barbara said quickly. "It was Mrs. Deal. I was wakened in the middle of the night by people talking. They sounded angry. I couldn't make out what was said, but I did hear Mrs. Deal cry out, 'No, no!' Then I—I think someone struck her. Then she cried."

Tom said, "Tell me this, Barbara, did you hear a rumbling sound beneath the hotel?"

"Yes!" exclaimed the girl, "I did. I've heard it every night. It sounds like some kind of heavy machinery."

She looked from Tom to Gulliver, then back to Tom, and when neither of them spoke, she said, "You know a lot more than you're telling me. How did you know about the strange noises beneath the hotel? How did you know Mrs. Deal cried that first night I was in Horsehead?"

"Lem Smiley—" Tom paused. He decided it might be better to tell as little as possible about Lem Smiley. "It's a pretty long story," he said. "There isn't time to go into it right now."

"You started to say something about Lem Smiley—"

"Lem Smiley heard the rumbling and the woman crying. He's the one who told us."

"Miss Barbary—"

The girl turned toward Gulliver.

"I want to ask yo' just one more question," the big man said. "I gotta have a straight answer. A lot depends on it."

"What is it, Gulliver?"

"When yo' dad came here, did he bring any o' them poison-dipped darts like the head-huntin' Injuns in the jungle use?"

"Blowgun darts?"

"Yeah."

"Yes. He brought three of them."

Gulliver's face went grim.

"He was going to give them to you as souvenirs," Barbara explained.

"Do yo' know where they're at right now?"

"I guess they're somewhere in the hotel."

Tom broke in quickly. "Didn't Hanford take them with him when he started out for Gulliver's ranch?"

Barbara shook her head. "No. You see, just before we left home my stepfather realized that he had forgotten to put the darts in his suitcase. I hadn't finished packing so I offered to put them in mine. I've had them in my suitcase ever since."

"Yo're dead sure Hanford didn't git 'em out o' yo' suitcase?"

Gulliver's grim earnestness brought a trace of a smile to the girl's face. "Yes," she said, "I'm sure. I saw them in my suitcase after my stepfather left."

Tom said, "I looked all over that room where I found you. I didn't see any suitcase there."

"It wasn't there. When they moved me to that room, they didn't move the bag."

"Then," said Gulliver emphatically, "that settles it." His great relief showed in every line of his battered face. "That sure as shootin' settles it, Tom. Them polecats in the hotel tried to frame John Hanford for Lem Smiley's murder."

"*Murder!*" the girl gasped. "Did you say Lem Smiley's murder?"

"That's what I said. One o' them darts has already been passed out, but not as a souvenir. I'm mighty glad to know that the passin' warn't done by yo' stepfather."

CHAPTER 23

Whiz Has an Idea

Hot soup, that Gulliver had enriched by the addition of dehydrated items from his bewildering larder, restored a large measure of Barbara Moore's vitality.

She had just finished the snack when a crackling of dry twigs beyond the circle of firelight brought Gulliver to attention with a six-gun in his hand.

A voice came from the cottonwoods near the creek.

"Put it away, Gulliver. It's all right."

"It's Whiz Walton," Tom said.

Gulliver dropped his pistol in its holster.

The reporter started talking while he was twenty yards from the campfire. "If you think," he said, "that I'm going to sit out there on the bank of the creek for the rest of the night, you're crazy. I've got things to do."

"Yo' was to stay on guard," replied Gulliver.

"I did stay on guard. I stayed as long as I intend to.

If those punks in the hotel were going to come after us, they'd have done it before this."

Whiz advanced to the girl and said, "My name's Walton. Whiz Walton."

Barbara nodded and held out her hand. "I don't know many famous people," she said. "I'm glad to meet you."

Whiz Walton found the girl's handclasp warm and friendly.

"So you're John Hanford's stepdaughter."

"Yes."

"What's going on in that hotel?" he asked.

Barbara shrugged her shoulders.

Tom Quest said, "Barbara doesn't know much more about it than we do, Whiz."

"Now that yo're back, yo' can tell me what yo' started to say when that guard set things movin'," Gulliver said to Whiz.

Whiz elevated his eyebrows, "What in the world are you talking about?"

"What am I talkin' about?" Gulliver rumbled. "What do yo' think I'm talkin' about? There was somethin' about that guard that yo' aimed to tell me."

"You must be mistaken, Gulliver."

"Like fun I'm mistaken. Do yo' mean to stand right there an' act like I was dreamin' things? Yo' dragged that guard into the shed an' looked him over an' yo' cut his hands loose an' yo' tied him up agin with his own shoelaces. Now why'd yo' do that? What was it yo' was goin' to tell me about him?"

The reporter said, "Skip it. Other things are more important than bits of dead gossip."

"Gossip!" snorted the big man. "Well, of all the—"

"What," cut in the columnist, "are we going to do about Miss Moore? Don't you think she should go back to Bliss?"

Gulliver scratched his chin thoughtfully. "I dunno. I ain't been thinkin' much about it."

"If you'll let me borrow the jeep, I'll take her there right now."

"I figured," Gulliver said, "we'd wait right here for a spell an' then, if them Horsehead gun slicks don't show up here, we'll go back there."

"Tonight?"

"We only got tonight. By noon tomorrow, the sheriff an' coroner an' a dozen others are likely to come stampedin' around here lookin' for me to tell 'em more about what happened to Lem Smiley. What we don't do tonight we likely won't git the chance to do."

Tom said, "But, Gulliver, if Mr. Hanford's not in that hotel there's really nothing to gain by going back there."

"There's aplenty to gain, Tom. There must be someone in that hotel can tell us why Hanford ain't got back. What's more, we got to find out the answer to Lem Smiley's murder so's Hanford can't be framed for somethin' he didn't do. An' on top of all that, it's them same critters that invited the gunplay. They're likely feelin' pretty proud after seein' me an' Whiz light out on a dead run. They gotta git their wings clipped."

Whiz said, "All the more reason to get Miss Moore away from here."

"Please," put in Barbara, "don't worry about me. I don't want you to change your plans on my account."

"How about it, Gulliver? Are you going to loan me your car?"

"Aw-w, I expect I might as well. I reckon yo're right, Whiz. This ain't no place for the lady especially when I'm fixin' to go on the warpath. But I wish yo'd tell me what it was about that guard."

Whiz shook his head and said, "Forget it."

Sitting on the bank of the stream alone on guard duty, he had made a few plans of his own and decided to say nothing to Gulliver about the fingerprints he had taken and his suspicions in connection with the guard.

"Just one thing," said Gulliver. "Yo' go right to Zeb Oliphant's house with Miss Barbary an' tell Zeb's missus to take good care of 'er till she hears from me." Gulliver turned to the girl. "Yo'll like Mrs. Oliphant," he promised.

"I wish you wouldn't go to so much trouble for me. Now that you've gotten me out of that hotel and away from those horrible people I'll be all right."

"Yo' just let us take care o' things."

Gulliver swept out the floor of the jeep, then folded a blanket and put it on the seat as a cushion. When the girl was seated, he tossed a blanket over her lap and tucked it in around her legs. Then he handed her a pair of goggles.

"Yo'll need these," he said. "This car's got no windshield."

"So I see. Where is it?"

"It got in my way," Gulliver said simply.

Whiz Walton took his place at the wheel and started

the motor. "I'll get back as soon as possible," he promised.

"There ain't no hurry, Whiz. Yo' can't git back before daybreak an' what we don't git done by daybreak won't git done."

"Oh, by the way," Whiz said, "have you noticed the creek since you got back to camp?"

"No," Gulliver replied. "What about it?"

"Just in case you're interested, the water's all muddy again tonight. When you're calling at the hotel, you might inquire about that."

Gulliver's chin seemed to get a little heavier and his voice took on more of a rasp. "When we git to that hotel," he said, "we're goin' to inquire about a lot o' things. Now git that car in gear an' shove on. Me an' Tom got things to do."

CHAPTER 24

The Spiral Again

GULLIVER looked and acted as if a mighty weight had fallen from his shoulders.

"Now, Tom," he boomed, "we gotta step lively. We got a lot to do, an' I'll have yo' know that I feel a darn sight more like doin' it than I did a little while ago."

"How's that, Gulliver?"

"It sure had me worried when I thought about how Lem Smiley got killed."

"The poisoned dart?"

"Yes siree." Gulliver stowed away a number of small things that had been taken from the medicine chest, slammed the lid and snapped the lock.

"I tried to tell myself that Hanford warn't no killer, but for a time it sure as shootin' looked bad for him."

"You think a lot of Hanford, don't you, Gulliver?" Tom asked.

"Me? I don't care about him one way or the other. It's only that yo' dad liked him an' that's enough for me. I wouldn't want to see a friend o' Hamilton Quest's bein' blamed for somethin' he didn't do. These lawmen we got around here would o' suspected him for sure. Gimme that pail o' water."

Tom handed his friend a three-gallon pail half-filled with water which Gulliver tossed on the low-burning fire.

"Now that I know from that gal's own lips that Hanford ain't nowhere around that hotel," he went on, "I'm set to take the place apart an' let the chips fall where they got a mind to."

"What are we going to do now?" Tom asked.

"Goin' back," replied Gulliver. "We not only got some business to finish up there, we got some questions needin' answers. I'll lay two to one them critters in that hotel are sheriff-shy." Gulliver poked Tom Quest in the chest to emphasize his words. "Mark what I'm atellin' yo', Tom, that there Barbary gal got ahold o' somethin' when she figured there was plottin' agin her an' John Hanford. Steve Deal can tell us what's happened to Hanford if he wants to do so, an' I'm agoin' to make him want to."

Tom said, "I wonder what got into Whiz.

"What do yo' mean?"

"He seemed to be mighty anxious to get away from here."

The moonlight revealed a heavy frown on the big man's face. "So yo' noticed it," he said. "Yo're right, Tom. Somethin' did git under Whiz's hide. He knows

somethin'. He learned somethin' while he was watchin' that guard. He was goin' to tell me about it."

"Then he changed his mind."

Gulliver nodded. "He changed his mind while he was settin' out in the cottonwoods by himself. Then, when he got here to camp, he was too doggoned ready an' willin' to shove off for Bliss."

Tom said, "I should think he'd want to be with us when we go back to the hotel."

"Me, too," Gulliver agreed. "But we got no time to think about Whiz Walton." He went on, "Grab them empty pails an' take 'em over to the crick. Fill 'em up with that muddy water an' leave 'em to settle so's we'll have clear water when we git back here."

Tom Quest's brain fairly whirled with unanswered questions as he made his way to Loafer Creek. What made the water turn muddy every night? The woman's scream had been accounted for, but what about the rumbling underground? And Whiz Walton—what had the keen-minded reporter learned and why didn't he share his knowledge?

The creek was just as muddy as it had been on the previous night. Tom filled the pails and set them on the shore, then something gray, lying at the water's edge, caught his attention. It was merely a piece of paper—it looked like newsprint—that had been caught by one of the tree roots that overhung the shore.

Tom would have passed it by, but he remembered the clipping about John Hanford—the one with the story of the robbery on the reverse side.

The paper hadn't been there previously and Tom was

curious. He made his way through a tangle of brush and leaned far out to reach the water-soaked paper.

He held it up and straightened out the folds and wrinkles and realized that it had a peculiar form. It was about an inch in width but two feet in length, yet it had been torn from a single newspaper page.

Squatting, Tom spread the paper on the grass, laying the bedraggled strip in the shape in which it had been torn from the newspaper. He saw how a strip that long could be made from a single page. It had been torn in the form of a spiral. Moreover, it was a particular kind of spiral. It was identical in the number of coils to the spiral of gold that Tom wore on his finger, even to the small reverse curl on the outer edge. The significance of that pattern struck Tom like a thunderbolt.

"Gulliver!" he yelled.

The big man came on the run and Tom pointed to the paper laid out in the moonlight.

Gulliver looked at it and then at Tom.

"It's exactly like the pattern on our rings," Tom said.

"Where'd yo' git it?"

"Right there," Tom pointed. "It must have floated downstream. Don't you see what it means? That's the spiral of Archimedes! And who would use that means of sending us a message?"

"John Hanford!" exclaimed Gulliver.

"Exactly. Maybe he never left the hotel at all. Maybe he's there right now, held prisoner just as Barbara was."

"He'd know we was here," Gulliver observed.

"Of course he would."

"Now I git it!" exclaimed Gulliver. "All Miss Barbary

knew is what she was told. They lied to her when they said Hanford had left. He's held a prisoner just like she was an' somehow he's got that paper out to let us know," Gulliver fairly whooped. "Now we got somethin' to git our teeth into! We'll go to that double-dratted shanty with our sights set for trouble."

He raced to the camp site, Tom close behind, and kicked back the lid of a heavy chest next to his medicine box. He stuck an extra box of cartridges in his pocket, then selected two hunting knives and tucked one in each of his boots. Tom selected a knife and scabbard to fit his belt, then Gulliver dipped into the chest again and found a short chunk of lead about three inches long and an inch in diameter.

"This," the big man grinned, "is kind o' helpful when I git to whop-whalin' with my fists." He closed his mighty hand about the bit of lead and smacked it against the other palm. "When I hit a critter with *this* in my hand," he said, "he don't ask no questions for some time. He just sleeps, an' generally without snorin'."

He slammed down the lid of the chest. "Yo' all set?" he asked.

Tom nodded.

"Then," said Gulliver, "let's make tracks."

"Are we going to follow the creek as we did the last time?"

"Not on yo' life! We're goin' straight down the road an' if there's any guards out to argue the right o' way with us, I'm set to argue back!"

CHAPTER 25

Gulliver in Action

GULLIVER walked boldly in the middle of the road to the Horsehead Hotel. There was no pretense of secrecy. His manner suggested that he half hoped a guard or two would leap from behind one of the trees bordering the highway and challenge his right to proceed. He carried his hands in the form of fists as if ready to swing into action at an instant's notice.

Tom Quest found it difficult to keep pace with the big man's long, purposeful strides. The two reached their destination without incident and stopped in front of the boxlike old hotel at the spot where the jeep had stopped on the preceding afternoon.

Lights shone through some of the windows, but there was no other sign of life either in or around the building —not even a guard was in view.

"What are we going to do now?" asked Tom. "Are we going to try the front door or go around to the kitchen?"

Gulliver squinted slightly with one eye as he gazed at the front door. He had a look of resentment on his face as if remembering that his raps on that door had gone unanswered.

"I figure," he said, "this here calls for the shortest route an' the most direct line. The best thing to do is to go right in fast an' not give them critters time to git set."

Gulliver finished his meditation.

"That's what I'm goin' to do," he decided, starting toward the building. "Yo', Tom, stay back o' me." He pounded up the steps and gained momentum as he crossed the porch. When his shoulders struck the door, the heavy panel of oak almost exploded. It splintered from top to bottom, but even so, the panel was stronger than the casing. The hinges were torn off at one side and the lock was broken on the other. The entire door fell in, crashing on the floor.

Gulliver stumbled through the opening and into the center of a large hall where he regained his balance. His voice boomed through the building.

"Steve Deal," he bellowed, "where yo' at?"

A door at the far end of the hall flew open. Annie Deal appeared for an instant. She shrilled a cry of alarm and raced up a flight of stairs. Gulliver took after her with Tom Quest at his heels.

"Yo'," he cried, "I want to talk to yo', too!"

He reached the second-floor corridor in time to see Annie duck into one of a long row of doors. He was half-

way to the door when Steve Deal stepped into the hall with a gun held level.

"Hold it," he barked. Stand where you are or I'll fire!"

Gulliver made no effort to stop. He didn't even slacken his pace. Ten feet away from Deal he dived headlong. Deal fired. The bullet streaked past Gulliver as one mighty shoulder hit Deal just below the knees with the force of a battering ram.

Deal's feet shot out from beneath him. He went down like a ninepin, losing the gun as he threw out his hands to break the fall. Tom Quest grabbed the pistol and Gulliver grabbed Steve Deal—grabbed him by the belt buckle and shirt collar and jerked him off the floor.

Deal threshed and kicked violently, but Gulliver ignored his squirming as well as his howling and cursing. He swung the hotel owner so his head rapped the wall. The blow was hard enough to stun Steve Deal and stop his struggling, but not hard enough to bring complete oblivion.

While Deal was in a dazed condition, Gulliver took him to the bedroom where Annie cowered in one corner, and dropped him on the floor.

"Shut the door, Tom," he ordered as he grabbed a pitcherful of water and emptied it in Deal's face.

Tom closed the door with his heel.

Deal gasped and sputtered and then sat up with a bewildered expression on his face.

"W—wha-what happened?" he stammered.

"I did, an' I'll happen again, only twice as much if yo' don't start yo' tongue waggin' double time."

Annie was inching toward a table in the corner of the room. She let her hand drop slyly, and moved it toward a drawer.

Tom saw the gesture. He was just about to warn her back when Gulliver moved with almost invisible speed. His hand came up from his boot and flicked toward the corner where Annie stood. Something flashed through the air and struck the table with a slight thud.

An involuntary gasp escaped from Annie. She leaped back and her eyes went wide as she stared at the handle of a knife that trembled less than an inch from where her hand would have been.

"Annie," said Gulliver, "yo' shouldn't try to mix into things like this. Especially when yo' got such nice bright mirrors in the room." To Tom he said, "Chances are there's a gun in the drawer, Tom. Yo' better git it before Annie hurts someone."

Tom got the gun.

"Now," said Gulliver, "we'll go on from where we left off."

Deal had recovered his balance. His face was no longer dazed and staring. He was shrewd-eyed and composed. He picked himself up from the floor and wiped his face on a towel.

"What's this all about?" he demanded. "Why did you come here like this?"

"Where," Gulliver rasped, "is John Hanford?"

"I told you all I know about him—"

"Save yo' lies, Deal! We already talked to Miss Barbary. Now we're here to talk to yo', an' none o' yo' gun

slingers are goin' to chase us spraddle-legged like the last time we was here."

"Hanford isn't here," insisted Steve Deal.

"All right," grunted Gulliver, "I reckon we can't git no more information out o' yo'."

"If you're smart, you'll get out of this house."

"Maybe," said Gulliver, "I just ain't smart."

He jabbed Deal in the stomach with force enough to double the man over. As his head dropped forward, Gulliver straightened him with an uppercut to the chin.

It took but a moment for Gulliver to pull a roll of tire tape from a pocket and fasten Annie's hands and then her ankles. He tossed her to the bed. Meanwhile, Tom tied her husband's hands and feet.

"Ain't it awful," Gulliver observed, "how much teachin' some men need before they learn not to tell lies? Now let's find Hanford."

He led the way on a systematic search, starting at one end of the corridor and working toward the other. They found most of the rooms bare and in a bad state of repair. In many, the plaster had fallen from the walls and ceilings, and the floors were badly broken. A few, however, had been made livable by patches on the plaster and new boards to replace broken ones. The furniture was poor but adequate. These rooms showed signs of use. There were clothes in the closets and a few books, papers, magazines and smoking supplies scattered around. But there was no sign of any of the men who used the rooms.

Gulliver led the way back down to the first floor. Starting at the front door, he and Tom moved through every

room and poked into every closet until they reached the kitchen. They found no one. It seemed that Deal and his wife were the only persons in the house.

"There might be hidden rooms," suggested Tom.

"We'll have a look in the cellar," Gulliver said, "an' if we don't find Hanford an' some o' the gents that live here, we'll start takin' down the walls."

It was at that moment that Annie, though her hands and feet were securely taped, managed to squirm to a small push button on the wall near the bed. By deft maneuvering her hands reached the button and pressed it.

Downstairs, neither Tom nor Gulliver heard the buzzer that sounded an alarm, but certain persons beneath the hotel heard it and prepared to receive visitors.

CHAPTER 26

The Battle in the Tunnel

An electric light burned over a flight of stairs leading from the kitchen to the cellar.

Tom Quest had been prepared for almost anything when he had gone to the hotel with Gulliver, but he was totally unprepared for what he saw in that basement.

It was one large room, broken only by the heavy timbers supporting the building. The dirt floor, at the rear, rose in a ramp that ended with wide, double doors. Tom judged by their location that the doors opened into the car shed. A new car stood at one side. Tom saw the Florida license plate and whispered, "Hanford's car." At the opposite end of the cellar, a tunnel extended as far as one could see.

The tunnel was about four feet in width and well shored to prevent a cave-in. At regular intervals, dim lights hung from the ceiling. Narrow tracks came from the tunnel and ended in the cellar where Tom and Gulliver stood.

There were half a dozen wheelbarrows and a number of spades to all of which clung moist clay. A small truck rested on the narrow-gauge tracks. Tom noticed that the truck was powered by storage batteries which at the moment were being recharged. A heavy cable ran from the batteries to elaborate equipment that rested on a concrete foundation along one wall. The power was generated by a gasoline motor connected to a dynamo which sent electric current into racks of batteries. It was an efficient plant of standard manufacture, one similar to the equipment that Gulliver used to supply power for lighting his ranch house.

Gulliver watched Tom poke around the machinery and the truck for several minutes. Then he scratched his bristling chin and muttered, "I don't git it."

Tom said, "I think I'm beginning to understand a few things. They're hauling dirt from the other end of that tunnel." He pointed to the ground. "It's dumped from the truck right here," he went on, "then loaded into wheelbarrows and taken up that ramp."

"Then what?"

Tom said, "It's probably dumped into the creek."

Gulliver snapped his fingers. "That's it!" he exclaimed. "Tom, yo' hit the nail plumb center on the head. They dump that there clay into the crick an' muddy it up. They been dumpin' it right recent. Yo' can see here," he

scraped off a handful of sticky clay from the inside of the bullet-shaped truck. "This here clay ain't had time enough to dry out."

Tom was enthused with the revelations. "Do you think the truck might have made the rumbling?" he asked.

"It could have."

"It doesn't seem possible that a little truck like this could make the ground fairly tremble."

Gulliver said, "Have yo' ever noticed how one small pebble tossed into a quiet pond can cover the whole pond with ripples?"

"Of course."

"Ripples and vibrations carry a long ways."

Tom said, "I hadn't thought of it like that."

"If yo'll recollect, Tom, that rumble was heard only when yo' put yo' ear down flat agin the ground. It's surprisin' how vibrations will carry. Yo' try it sometime on railroad tracks an' yo'll hear a train when she's miles away. Yo' can even hear a trottin' horse a long ways off. The chances are that tunnel comes a lot closer to where we was camped than yo' think."

"And I suppose the truck is pretty heavy when it's loaded."

Gulliver nodded and said, "We gotta find out where the men are at."

Tom pointed to the tunnel and said, "That's the only place we haven't searched."

"We're goin' there right now." The big man led the way.

The tunnel was barely high enough for Gulliver to

negotiate without stooping. The bulbs that burned dimly came to within an inch of his hat. The clay walls were damp, and the air was clammy. There were places on the floor where Gulliver and Tom stepped through pools of stagnant water. After about a hundred paces, the tunnel curved to the left.

The turn confirmed Gulliver's theory that the tunnel went toward the camp site. Lights dotted the route ahead for an incredible distance; in fact, Tom couldn't see the tunnel's end. He noticed that the passage had been built in a workmanlike manner.

John Hanford's background came to his mind as he followed in Gulliver's footsteps. Hanford was an engineer. A good part of his work had dealt with tunnel building. Had he supervised this piece of work? Tom rejected that idea almost as soon as it entered his mind. The tunnel represented months of work and Hanford had arrived only within the last two weeks. But there must be some connection.

Tom's thoughts were interrupted at this point. Without warning, bedlam broke loose. The tunnel had widened unexpectedly and concealed by the angle of the wall, the friends of Steve Deal had been waiting. They leaped into action, closing in from both sides before either Tom or Gulliver could draw a gun.

Tom jerked free of the hands that grasped him and went into action with his fists. There were shrill cries and yells, combined with thudding blows and gasps of pain. Tom jabbed one man in the stomach, then brought a hard right-hand smash to a near-by chin.

Someone shouted, "Don't kill 'em with guns! Remember the orders! We gotta use the darts!"

It was a shout that froze Tom's blood. It brought horrible memories of Lem Smiley's gruesome death. He fought like a panther. He leaped and dodged, ducked beneath one blow and collided with another. It seemed that men swarmed on him like angry bees. His breath was going fast. He knew he couldn't fight much longer.

In the meantime, Gulliver was busy. His huge fists swung like mallets and every time one landed, a man fell beneath the mighty blow. Two men had leaped to his shoulders. He grabbed one by the hair and fairly threw him to the ground. Then he flung himself sideways, ramming the other against the wall. The man went limp and dropped from his shoulder. Gulliver hardly felt the blows that landed on all parts of his face and body. He was a mighty tower of strength, but the odds were hopelessly uneven. Human endurance, even Gulliver's, couldn't last long in such a fight. He felt himself weakening. His knuckles were battered and bleeding and his blows seemed to have lost their sting. Then he saw a man leap up with two bits of wood, about six inches long. He recognized them. Poisoned darts!

"Lemme at 'em!" cried the man.

Tom had fallen back against the wall. His arms hung limply at his sides. He no longer had the strength to defend himself against the onslaught of blows. He saw the man with the darts come toward him. One of those deadly weapons was held, daggerlike, over the man's head.

It seemed that time stood still. To Tom Quest's reeling senses, everything seemed to have acquired that unreal pace of slow motion. He saw that dart start down toward his face. He tried to move, but his muscles refused to respond. He tried to dodge, but couldn't move his head. The dart came nearer and then some miracle intervened. A huge hand brushed Tom's nose. Vaguely he heard Gulliver's voice raised in a roaring oath.

Tom blinked. Gulliver stood stock still. The fighting had stopped. The big man was staring at the dart that had penetrated the palm of his hand. Then, roaring like a savage gorilla, he snatched out the dart and threw it to the ground.

Tom felt himself falling, sinking into billowy black clouds, through layer after layer of softness and blackness until he knew no more.

CHAPTER 27

John Hanford Shows His Colors

TOM QUEST regained consciousness by slow degrees. At first he was aware of a dull throbbing pain that hammered at his temples, and a roaring like a hundred waterfalls that seemed to echo through his brain.

He realized that he was lying on his back on something hard. When he opened his eyes, he was seized by a spell of giddiness that made everything whirl. As this subsided, he saw a dirt ceiling overhead.

He turned, and a million darts of pain stabbed every portion of his body. He saw a blank wall on his side. It was several seconds before he realized that it was a wall of clay, and damp. He lay motionless, trying to piece together a hodgepodge of recollections. Gradually, the fragments fell into a pattern and he remembered the

walk through the tunnel, the surprise attack, the fight, and then that awful instant when a dart, like the curare-tipped one that had poisoned Lem Smiley, was coming toward his face—and then the intervention of brave Gulliver's big hand!

The vision of Gulliver, standing in the last seconds of the fight, staring with unbelieving eyes at the dart sticking out from his palm, was one that Tom would never forget. He was almost engulfed by the sickening thought of Gulliver's dying in exquisite anguish as Lem Smiley had died.

Tom grasped the details of his present situation in small bits. He realized that he lay upon the ground. Then, as the roaring in his brain subsided, he heard low voices from somewhere behind his back.

He turned slowly, fighting against the pain that every movement cost.

He was in a room that apparently had been cut into the side of the tunnel. Three walls, the floor and ceiling were of clay. The only door was set in a wall made of wood sheathing. The place was lighted by one bulb overhead.

Gulliver was sitting on the dirt floor massaging his lame muscles while he talked to an extremely thin man seated on the edge of a cot. Tom blinked his eyes to sharpen the focus. There was something familiar about the man.

He saw a narrow face with the faintest indication of gray stubble as if the owner had gone for a day without a shave. The skin was tightly drawn over the bones and

the cheeks were sunken. There was a parchmentlike quality about the man's complexion. He seemed to have suffered long exposure to the drying elements of hot sunshine without acquiring the healthy tan that generally goes with an out-of-door existence.

Then Tom Quest knew where he had seen that face before—it was in a photograph—the one he had shown Whiz Walton on the way to Bliss.

"John Hanford," Tom breathed.

Gulliver heard the whispered exclamation. Turning quickly he said, "Tom, yo've come conscious at last. How do yo' feel, son?"

"I—I guess I'm all right," Tom replied in a thin voice. "Just battered up a little bit."

"Yo' got battered up aplenty, Tom, but yo' got no broken bones. I looked yo' over to make sure o' that." He gestured toward the thin man. "This here," he said, "is John Hanford."

Tom's level eyes met those of the engineer.

Hanford turned to Gulliver. "Resembles his father," he said briefly. To Tom he said, "I don't suppose you remember me. You were quite young when you left the jungle."

"I remember you, Mr. Hanford, but I wouldn't have recognized you."

"Ten years of jungle suffering would alter anyone's appearance," Hanford replied curtly.

Tom nodded and said, "Yes, sir, I suppose that's true. Did you—that is—I came here—" Tom hesitated, hardly daring to put the all-important question into words.

Hanford spoke. "I know nothing about your father," he said.

"You—you don't?"

"If I had, I would have communicated with you immediately upon my return to the States."

Gulliver saw Tom's hopes hit bottom and spoke up quickly. "There's this about it, Tom," the big fellow said, "Hanford ain't sure yo' dad is dead."

"You mean," Tom asked quickly, "there's a chance that he's alive?"

"I turned up alive," Hanford said.

"I saw a picture of you, Mr. Hanford. You were with some Indians and one of them wore the brooch," Tom held up his hand, "the brooch like this ring. Did you notice that?"

"Of course I noticed it."

"My father must have given it to him."

"That particular Indian was a stranger in the village. I tried to learn something about the brooch, but he refused to answer questions. Of course," the engineer continued, "the existence of that brooch proves nothing. That bit of jewelry will undoubtedly survive much longer than any people who are now on earth." He turned to Gulliver, "In our particular case," he finished, "that won't be very long."

Tom found himself instinctively disliking the engineer. Perhaps it was because Hanford had been the cause of hopes fanned to flame and then extinguished. But Tom refused to give up all hope that his father might be alive.

"Mr. Hanford," he began, "do you think it would be worth while for us to go to that jungle country, to try to find that native with the brooch and question him?"

"I said I had questioned him. Do you think you might be more successful?"

"Well I—I didn't mean it that way. I—"

"Furthermore," cut in the engineer, "you'd better not plan on going anywhere. All three of us are to be killed as soon as the gang finds it convenient. Four of us," he corrected.

"Four?"

"My stepdaughter Barbara Moore came here with me. She, too, has been captured."

"They ain't goin' to git that girl," said Gulliver.

"They already have her."

"They *had* 'er up to a couple o' hours ago. Me 'n Tom got 'er out o' this place an' our partner is on the way to Bliss with 'er right now."

Hanford's face, instead of brightening at this announcement, took on a peculiar look.

"Did she tell you about our situation? How we came here?" he inquired.

Gulliver nodded vigorously and repeated Barbara's suspicions.

"She told us," he said, "how yo' an' 'er come here expectin' to meet someone that'd have advice about investments."

Tom thought he saw a glint of cunning in the face of the engineer.

"Go on," Hanford said softly. "What else did she tell you?"

"She told us yo' had gone in yo' car to meet me at my ranch. I reckon Deal himself or his wife must o' told 'er that."

"How long ago was I supposed to have left here?"

"The mornin' after yo' arrived."

"Go on."

"The girl figured yo' had met up with foul play. She figured the whole scheme was worked out to try to git ransom money out o' the bank that handles 'er estate."

"She figured that out, did she?" Hanford's voice was barely audible as he said, "She's a smart girl."

"Is that the situation?" Gulliver inquired.

"She's partly right." Hanford took a deep breath and said, "I might as well tell you everything, Gulliver. You, too, Tom. Then you'll see what little chance we have. We did come here, as Barbara said, to meet a man who was to advise us on investments. But that was merely a ruse to get us here. Some time ago there was an armored car robbery by a gang whose leader was known as Ace Carmody—"

"I know about that!" Tom exclaimed.

Hanford raised his eyebrows.

Tom looked at Gulliver and said, "Do you remember that piece of folded newspaper beneath Lem Smiley's shirt?"

Gulliver said, "Yeah, but I didn't read it."

"Well, Whiz and I read it and it told about that robbery."

"Let Hanford go on with his story," Gulliver said.

Hanford continued, "One of that gang was arrested on another charge and sentenced to ten years in prison. He was the one who had hidden the loot. That sounds strange to you, doesn't it, that only one of the crooks knew where the loot was hidden. It seems that he was the one man in the gang whom all of the others trusted. And he is the one who landed in prison. He got word to Ace Carmody that he'd keep the secret until the gang got him out of jail.

"The gang moved into this hotel and made an agreement with Deal and his wife. They decided to tunnel through the hill and come up through the floor of the new jail where the gangster was confined."

"So that's it," breathed Tom Quest.

"They worked night and day on the tunnel, but they found themselves against an engineering problem when they neared the finish of their task. It required a careful calculation to bring the tunnel to the surface inside the prison.

"One of the gang had a newspaper clipping that told of the robbery." Hanford looked at Tom. "That must have been the article you saw, though how it ever got into your hands I don't know."

Tom nodded without speaking.

Hanford went on, "There was a story about me on the reverse side. It proved to be an inspiration. The gang decided that I was the man for their purpose. They brought me here, with the threat that my stepdaughter and I would be killed unless I did as they demanded. I made

the calculations and the tunnel is very nearly finished.

"Now that the gang no longer needs me, I'm being held here until they're ready to kill me."

Tom asked about Lem Smiley.

"I heard some of the men talking about him," Hanford replied. "He was captured and held prisoner. He was killed, trying to escape."

"Did you know how he was killed?"

Hanford shook his head.

"Killed," muttered Gulliver, "by the same thing that's goin' to kill me! Them skunks got some o' them blowgun darts from yo'."

"I had three of them."

"Yeah. They aim to do their killin' with them things, so's yo'll be blamed. I suppose they'll see to it that yo' body never turns up. They'll have the law on a nation-wide man hunt for yo'."

"Did you say one of the darts got you?"

Gulliver opened the palm of a hand that had been clenched. "That cut," he said, "was made by one o' them darts."

"And Lem Smiley? What about him?"

"We found a dart on him, inside his shirt." Gulliver swallowed hard. "It—it was awful," he said, "to watch him die."

"Just a minute. You say you *found* the dart that killed Lem Smiley?"

"Yeah."

"Then you needn't anticipate death by curare."

"Huh?"

"What do you mean?" demanded Tom eagerly.

"I brought those darts along to give to you and Tom. I knew they were dangerous, so I decided to make them harmless by breaking off the poisoned end and sharpening new points. I fixed two of them, but Barbara was waiting to close her suitcase—I had forgotten about them until my own bag had been closed and locked—so I postponed fixing the third, intending to do so before I gave them to you. If Smiley died of curare poison, the other two darts are harmless."

"Then I ain't dyin' o' that stuff?"

When Hanford shook his head, Tom felt the release of the tension that had been within him ever since he had seen the dart sticking in Gulliver's hand.

"Well," breathed Gulliver with a huge sigh of relief, "I'm glad o' that."

"Almost any death is to be preferred," Hanford said.

"We're going to die anyway," Tom said. "They don't dare let us stay alive now. Probably they'll kill us as soon as they've broken through the floor of the jail and rescued their pal."

John Hanford said, "I tried to let you know I was in danger."

"Yo' tried?" repeated Gulliver. "How did yo' know we was around here?"

"I heard you yesterday when you came to the door."

"I was at the back door. Yo' mean to say yo' could hear me away down here?"

Hanford nodded.

"How'd yo' try to let us know yo' was in danger?"

"Each night the workmen use a small truck to haul loose dirt from the tunnel."

Tom said, "We saw the truck."

"I overheard enough to know that the dirt was dumped into the creek. I also knew that the truck ran unaccompanied by anyone, and I took the one chance in a million that it would come to your attention."

The engineer pointed to the door. "You see that little slit?"

The slit was about ten inches wide and three inches in height. It was cut through the door at shoulder level.

"They pushed my food to me through that slit," Hanford said, "and through it I could watch the truck moving back and forth. When I was first locked in here everything was taken from me except a newspaper. When I knew you were near, I tore this paper into spirals, crumpled them up, reached through the slit and dropped them on top of the outgoing dirt. It was a long chance, but my only hope. I thought you, Gulliver, might see one of Hamilton Quest's favorite geometric patterns floating on the creek and know what it meant."

"Doggone it, Hanford, we did see the pattern! Tom seen it just this evenin'. That's what brought us here all geared for trouble. The only trouble is, we got took by surprise."

"Well," sighed the engineer, "we're all in the same situation."

"Have yo'," asked Gulliver, "been here all these days? Have yo' been in this room all this time?"

Hanford nodded. "It's been miserable," he said. "They passed one meal a day to me."

"I don't suppose yo' thought o' holdin' out a knife or somethin'?"

"No. You may be sure no knives accompanied the meals."

Gulliver slapped his pockets. "They stripped me an' Tom clean," he said. "We had aplenty o' cuttin' tools when we come here."

"A knife wouldn't help," Hanford said.

"Maybe not, but leastwise we wouldn't have to sit here twiddlin' our thumbs an' doin' nothin'. It'd help to think we was makin' some effort to git out. If we had a knife we could maybe whittle away at that slit in the door." Gulliver paused and eyed the wooden wall. "Yo' sure yo' got nothin', Hanford? Not even a razor blade?"

The engineer's smile was wry. "How many times must I tell you," he said, "that I have had nothing but one poor meal a day and an old newspaper."

Tom Quest sat up suddenly. He felt as if an electric spark had ignited something in his brain.

"Mr. Hanford—" he said.

The engineer turned toward the boy.

"You say you've been here two weeks?"

The engineer nodded.

"They haven't let you out of this room at all?"

"No. Not since the first night I was here when I made the survey and gave them their instructions for their tunnel."

"Then how is it," asked Tom slowly, "that you haven't grown a two-weeks' beard?"

The engineer's eyes flashed and in that instant Tom Quest saw venom and hatred in Hanford's face. Gulliver's face became alert, alive, then inflamed.

He took two strides toward Hanford and clutched the man's face in one of his mighty hands. "That stubble ain't but one day old," he said. "Two days at most. John Hanford, yo' answer Tom's question!"

The hate in Hanford's eyes gave way to fear. He trembled visibly. His voice was shaken as he stammered, "I—I—that is—"

Gulliver cut in sharply. "Yo'," he said, "answer that question!"

CHAPTER 28

Whiz Walton Returns

WHEN TOM asked the question, he knew he had found an inconsistency in the story John Hanford had told; but he was amazed at the look of hatred and fear that came into Hanford's face.

Gulliver seemed to sense the truth ahead of Tom. "Yo', Hanford," he roared, "yo' lied to us!" His voice rose in pitch and intensity. "I've had enough o' lyin'! I never did like yo'! I felt like mashin' yo' face in a dozen times down in that jungle country, but I didn't because I thought yo' was a good friend o' Hamilton Quest. But yo' wasn't! Yo' proved it right here a few minutes ago. If yo'd o' been the friend Quest thought yo' was, yo'd never o' come out o' that jungle without investigatin' the clue yo' had when yo' saw that Indian wearin' the spiral brooch!"

The big man smacked his fist against the other palm. His voice held an almost animallike snarl of unadulterated rage when he cried, "Yo' lied to us about bein' locked in this room for two weeks!"

Tom Quest had never seen Gulliver so infuriated as he was at this moment. His battered face, caked with blood, sweat and red clay—distorted in anger—was horrible to see. Yet there was something magnificent about such a suddenly released flood of untamed fury. It was primitive. It was something close to Nature, like a bursting dam, a cloudburst, or a volcano in eruption.

John Hanford fell back on the bunk, cringing against the wall before the big man's outburst. Gulliver reached out with one hand, grabbed the front of Hanford's shirt and jerked him to his feet.

"Startin' now," he roared, "yo're talkin' true facts. Maybe all of us are marked for killin', but I aim to know the truth before they come to git us!"

The engineer tried to speak but stammered meaninglessly in abject terror.

"Start talkin'," Gulliver commanded.

Hanford's knees buckled. He would have collapsed and slumped to the floor if Gulliver hadn't supported him.

"I—I—wait," he pleaded. "I'll talk."

Gulliver literally threw him to the cot and stood, feet wide apart, huge shoulders hunched slightly forward, fists threatening.

"How long," he asked, "have yo' been locked in this room?"

"Only since y-yesterday," Hanford whimpered.

"What about before that?"

"I—I was here just as I told you, helping the gang with the tunnel. They—they finished their work—they're ready to break through to the jail and rescue Carmody's friend."

"Why did yo' help 'em?"

"Th-they made me. I—"

Gulliver interrupted, "Hold on, Hanford," he cried. "Yo're tellin' true facts now. Yo' stick to *true facts* or so help me I'll take yo' apart."

Obviously, John Hanford was telling the truth now. Haltingly, shamefacedly, he told about his need for a large sum of money. Ace Carmody had been vacationing in Florida. He had made it a point to meet the engineer shortly after reading about him in the same newspaper that told about the robbery. The two had held a number of secret meetings and finally reached an agreement.

John Hanford was to aid in the completion of a tunnel that would terminate beneath the prison in Texas. He would, in fact, be on hand in person to supervise the last few yards of digging, and in exchange for his service Carmody and his men were to hold Barbara Moore until her executors had paid over a large sum of the money that was being held in trust for her.

Everything had gone as planned until Hanford's work was finished. Then Ace Carmody became a double-crosser.

He had ordered Hanford held a prisoner after Lem

Smiley had escaped only to die outside. Then someone had to take the blame for Smiley's death and Hanford had been marked for that purpose. In desperation, he had dropped bits of newspaper torn into spiral shapes on top of the dirt that was being removed. That part of his story was true, but he had been sending out the cryptic messages only since yesterday. Not for two weeks, as he had previously stated.

Gulliver's voice had returned to a saner level. "Yo' ornery, schemin' skunk," he fumed. "I met Miss Barbary. A finer gal I ain't never seen. To think that she was worried for fear that somethin' had happened to yo'. If yo' needed cash, why didn't yo' ask 'er for it?"

"I—I did," whined the engineer. "B—but I—that is—she insisted that I tell her why I needed such a lot of money."

"Why didn't yo' tell 'er?"

"I—I couldn't."

"What did yo' want it for?"

Hanford squirmed uneasily. He buried his face in his hands.

Gulliver repeated his question and added, "It must o' been somethin' crooked. Yo' knew the gal wouldn't give it to yo' if she knew the truth. Why did yo' want that money?"

"I—I wanted it to finance an airport in South America. That's the truth, Gulliver. I wanted to—to do it secretly."

All during the conversation Tom had been thoughtfully silent. Now at last he spoke.

"Mr. Hanford," he said, "I think you lied to us about my father, too. I think you know whether he is alive and where he is and why he can't come back. I don't know your reasons for all this secrecy and for—"

While Tom was speaking, Gulliver got to his feet. Slowly he approached the cringing engineer. His enormous hands were extended toward the scrawny throat of John Hanford. From down deep in him there came a roar. "Spit out the truth, yo' lyin' rattlesnake." His fingers started to close around Hanford's throat.

"No, no," screamed Hanford. "Don't kill me. I'll tell you. I'll tell you. Quest is alive. He was captured. But he was alive and well just a few months ago."

"Why didn't yo' tell us, yo'—yo' polecat?" roared Gulliver.

"He knows about my secret. I couldn't, I—if he came back the whole world would know about my plans—"

It was then that gunfire sounded in the tunnel just beyond the door.

Hanford leaped to his feet. "It's the jail break," he exclaimed. "They're coming through the tunnel with the man they rescued!"

The gunfire increased in violence as it came nearer.

Gulliver's great fists opened and closed mechanically. "If only we could get into that row," he complained bitterly. "If I could just git the chance to swing on a few o' them critters that aim to kill us off."

The three captives marked the progress of the fight by the sounds of gunfire. The shooting thinned out, then stopped altogether.

"It's over," observed Tom Quest. "They must have killed the last of the prison guards."

Gulliver sighed heavily. "I reckon we come next," he muttered.

As if to confirm his reckoning, a key rattled in the lock.

Gulliver got to his feet.

"Whoever comes in here," he growled, "is goin' to have to shoot mighty doggoned fast. I aim to go down afightin'." He tensed, ready to spring. The door swung open.

It was Whiz Walton!

CHAPTER 29

"Let's Git Gittin'!"

WHIZ WALTON never came closer to complete annihilation. Gulliver's fist had been cocked. He had been poised to deliver a devastating blow to the man who opened the door. Just in time he checked himself.

"Yo'," he roared. "Where did yo' come from? Yo're supposed to be in Bliss."

Whiz Walton grinned and said, "I'm not."

"I can see that. Are yo' mixed up in that Carmody gang?"

"How did you know about the Carmody gang?" demanded the reporter.

Gulliver pointed to Hanford sprawled on the bunk, with his face buried in his arms—a picture of complete defeat.

"That polecat told me about Carmody. What was all the shootin'? Where is the gang? How is it yo're here?"

"One thing at a time." Walton laughed. "Who's that?"

"Hanford."

"What!" exclaimed the reporter.

"Now yo' answer my questions, Walton." Gulliver struck a belligerent attitude. "I ain't in no mood for double talk."

"Ace Carmody and his gang are being loaded into cars. They're going to have a police escort from now on."

"Police?" echoed Gulliver.

Tom Quest said, "Did you bring the police?"

Whiz said, "Yes."

Gulliver looked suspicious. "Yo' didn't git no police in Bliss," he said.

"I didn't go to Bliss. I drove over to the new jail—it was a lot nearer."

"With that Barbary girl?"

The reporter grinned and nodded. "She enjoyed it," he said. Then Whiz grew sober and quite businesslike. "I'll tell you the whole thing, Gulliver. You remember that lug you left me to guard while Tom went in the window?"

"Yeah. Yo' was goin' to tell me somethin' about him an' then yo' changed yo' mind."

"I thought he looked familiar. Then I remembered that I had seen his picture or a picture of someone who looked a lot like him in a newspaper. The fellow looked like a crook named Lefty Peavy. I took a sample of his fingerprints on the celluloid envelopes in my wallet. I didn't think there would be anyone in Bliss who could

classify them so Barbara and I drove around to the prison.

"The warden classified the fingerprints while I telephoned the Washington office of my newspaper. The night man on the desk saw that I got fast action when I called the FBI to check on the fingerprints."

"Were that man's fingerprints on file in Washington?" Tom asked.

The reporter nodded. "They belong to Lefty Peavy all right, Tom. I got the names of Lefty's pals and one of those pals was Ace Carmody. Then things began to click in the warden's brain. He had a prisoner by the name of Gutzman—also a member of Carmody's mob. Then Barbara told the warden her suspicions. That started things.

"The warden loaded up some cars and came here on the double. We saw the front door smashed in."

For the first time in a long while Gulliver's face broke into a faint grin. "It was in my way," he muttered.

"We didn't see anything on the first floor, but we found Deal and his wife upstairs. Deal looked as if he had tried to discuss something with you."

Gulliver nodded. "It wasn't much of a discussion."

"There was a lot," continued the reporter, "to indicate that you had been through the place. In the kitchen we found the door to the cellar so we came below.

"A couple of mugs with bandages on their heads opened fire. One of them was Lefty Peavy. The cops fired back—then more of the gang came from the tunnel. It didn't last long."

"Then they didn't get through to the jail at all?" Tom asked.

Whiz Walton shook his head. "The law got all of them including Ace Carmody himself. Deal and his wife are telling all they know."

"I," said Gulliver, "gotta git in on that."

He stepped to the bunk and pulled John Hanford to his feet. "This critter," he explained, "is one o' the ringleaders in the whole doggoned abduction scheme. Worse'n that, he's knowed all the time that Hamilton Quest is alive an' well. We know where he is an' we're goin' after him, just as quick as we kin."

"All the big news comes in bunches," said Whiz.

"There's things yo' dunno, Whiz. Bustin' that critter out o' jail was only half o' the plot. The rest was a scheme to hold Miss Barbary for ransom. He squealed his head off. Now I aim to take him to the law an' let him tell his story all over agin."

The big man favored Hanford with one of his blackest scowls.

"Do yo'," he threatened, "have any objections to that?"

Hanford shook his head slowly. In a voice that was barely audible he said, "I'll talk."

"I thought so," Gulliver started from the room, calling, "Let's git gittin'!"

In the police interrogation that followed, Steve Deal and his wife tried to put the blame for everything on Ace Carmody. Carmody claimed it was John Hanford's idea. Hanford blamed both of the others. There were times when all three talked at once trying to unload

some of the criminal responsibility, but from the start it was obvious that all of the principals, as well as the underlings in Carmody's gang, would feel the full weight of the law in the prosecution of the murder charge as well as the lesser ones.

Later, in the large front hall of the Horsehead Hotel, Barbara sat on the stairs with Tom on one side and Gulliver on the other.

The police had finished taking notes and were about to leave with the prisoners when a car drew up in front and a uniformed man came through the space where the door had been.

He brought a message which he handed to the warden. The prison official read it, then looked about the room.

He saw Whiz Walton scribbling frantically, covering sheet after sheet of notebook paper. The room became silent. Then the reporter looked up.

"What goes?" he said.

The warden handed him the note.

Whiz grasped the contents with a single glance. "This," he said, "makes it just about complete!"

"What yo' got?" demanded Gulliver.

"When Gutzman was told that his chances for a rescue had been blown sky high, he decided to shorten his term if possible. He's told where the holdup money is hidden."

The warden slapped Whiz on the shoulder and said, "There's a reward for the recovery of that money as well as for the capture of the gang who stole it. Congratulations!"

"Congratulations, my eye," retorted Whiz. "Those two," he pointed to Tom Quest and Gulliver, "get the reward."

Tom opened his mouth to argue but before he could speak, Gulliver broke in. "The three of us," he said, "will git around to talkin' that over by and by. I got a notion as to how that cash can be put to good use."

Tom Quest said, "How?"

A slow grin spread over Gulliver's homely face. "John Hanford said he couldn't make that Indian in the jungle tell where he got yo' mother's brooch. Now I got a notion that if we could find that critter, maybe I could find a way to start his tongue awaggin'."

"You mean to say we're going to South America?"

The big man nodded. "While we're there, maybe we can learn why Hanford was so doggoned anxious to git the cash for an airport."

He turned to Whiz and said, "Son, do yo' hanker to go with us?"

The reporter grinned happily.

"What do you think?" he said.

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